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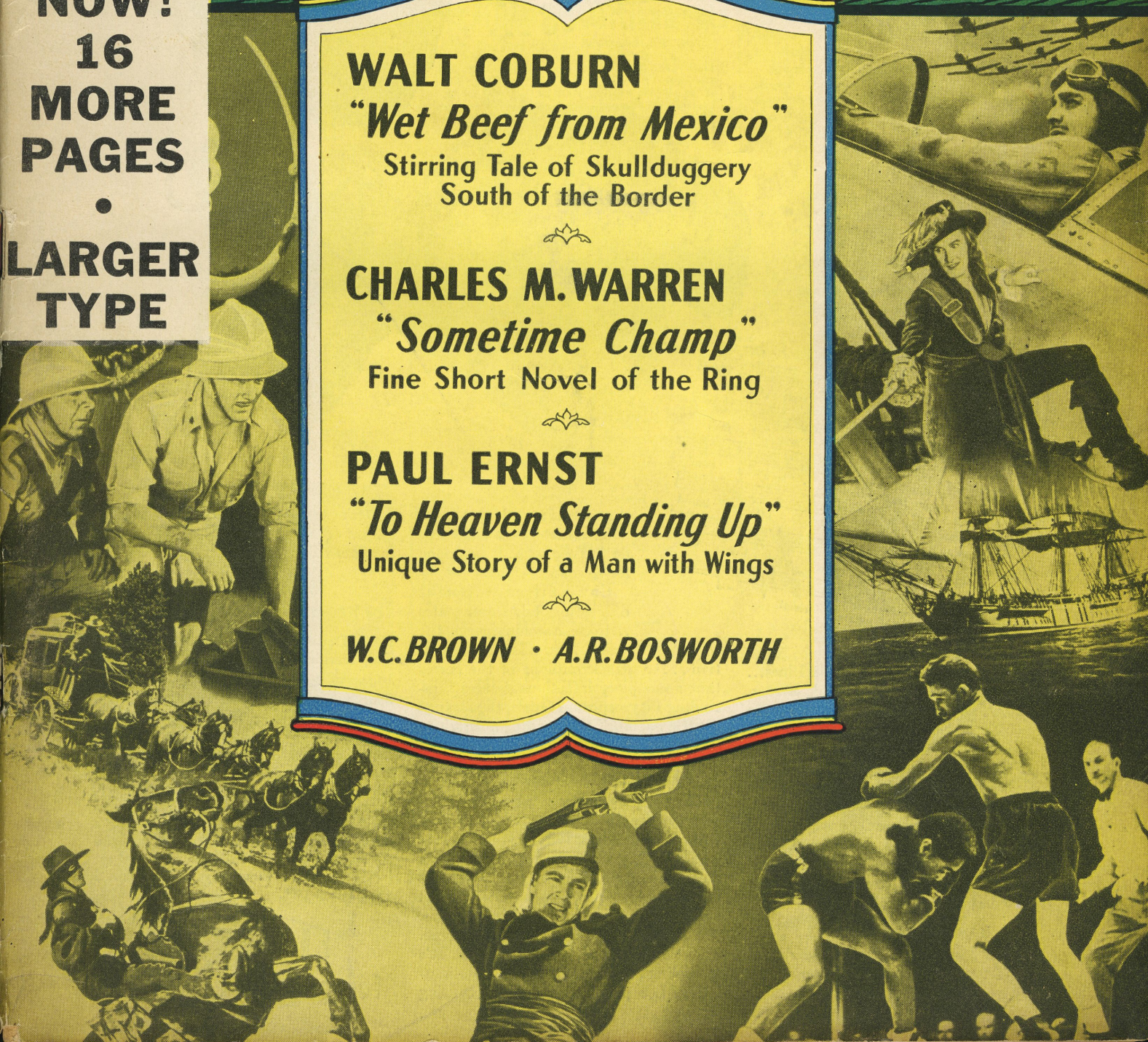
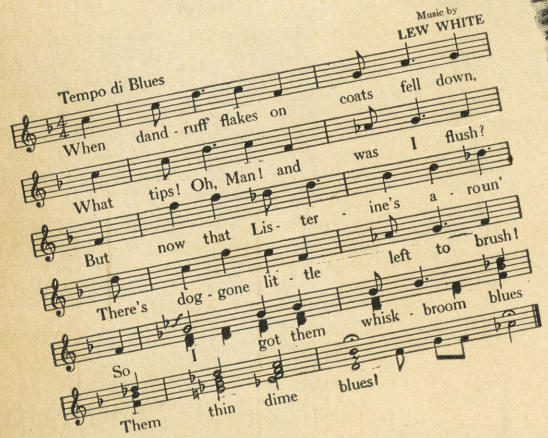


"I got them whisk-broom blues . . ."



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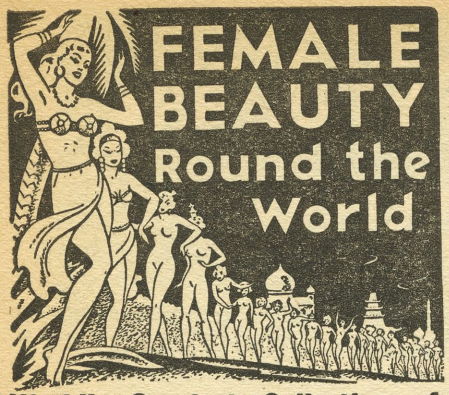

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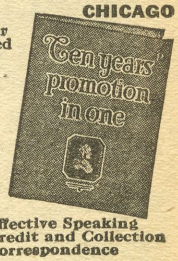

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A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

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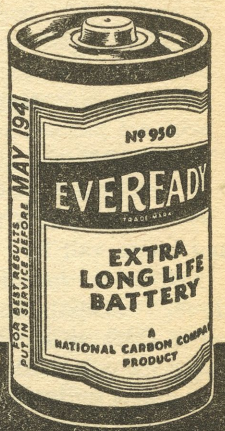
(Signed) *W. B. Bolton*



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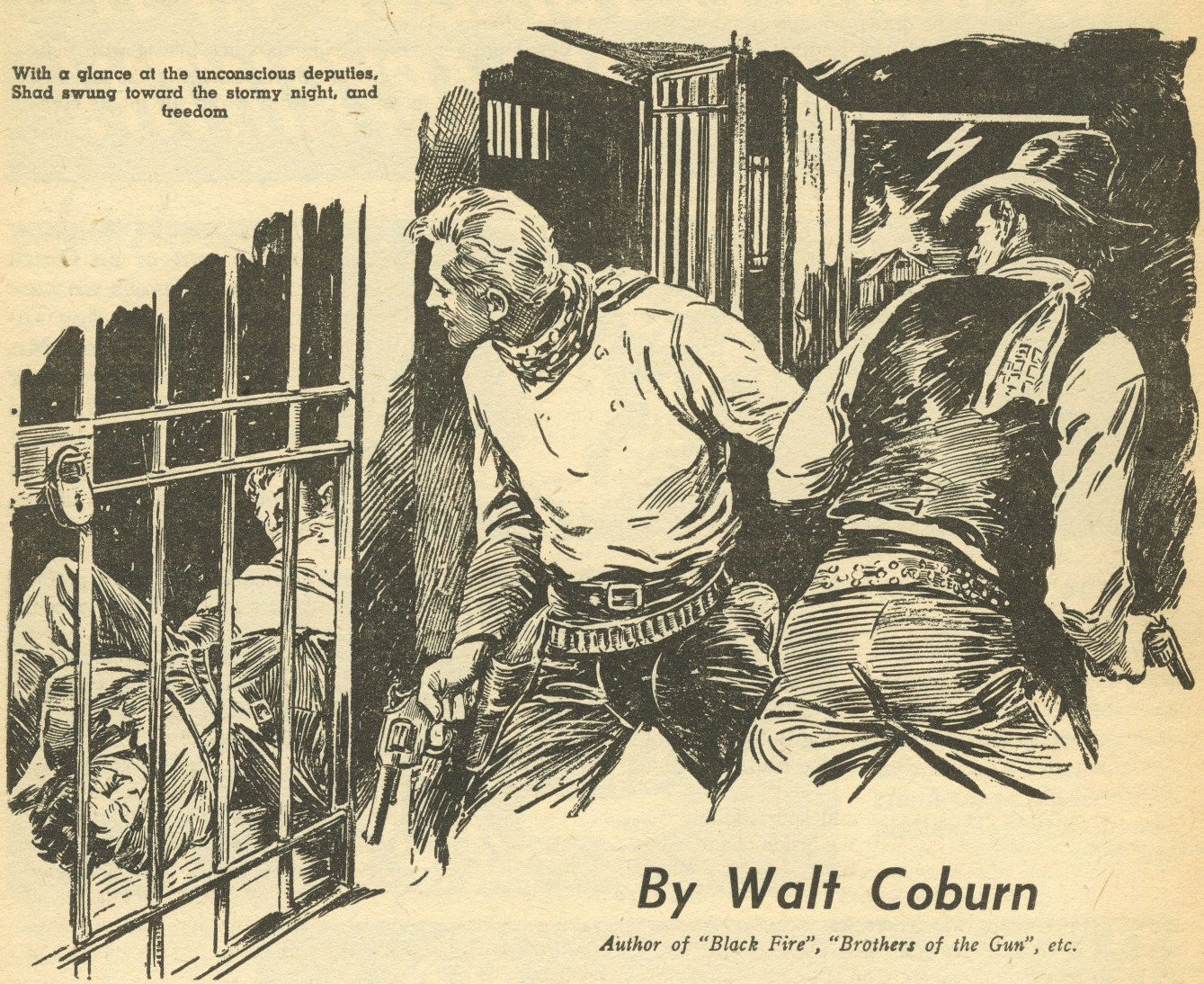


With a glance at the unconscious deputies, Shad swung toward the stormy night, and freedom

By Walt Coburn

Author of "Black Fire", "Brothers of the Gun", etc.

Build a ten-foot fence along the Border; burn the cattle-brands clear. Still the stolen herds slip away by night, and men die mysteriously. And only a cowman with a talent for the six-gun and a charge of Irish anger in him would dare to go calling at the Devil's ranch

CHAPTER I

CARTRIDGES COME CHEAP

THERE was a round moon and the stars hung low and patches of white clouds crossed the sky. It was the kind of a moonlight night that poets sing about and lovers wait for.

And as he rode along the trail that twisted its way through mesquite and giant sujuaro cactus Shed Gibson got to thinking about Rita Wagner and the promises they had made one another not so long ago on a night like this. And a slow smile played around the corners of his straight-lipped mouth and his eyes watched the fleecy clouds scudding across the stars.

Then he remembered where he was headed for and the sort of a job that had fetched him out on such a night. The smile left his mouth and his blue eyes hardened. A big cloud with black edges slid across the moon. Shad Gibson's hand was on his six-shooter as he followed the trail into the black depths of Mesquite Canyon. Twenty-five-year-old Shad was riding to Bob Huntoon's place to kill him.

Shad had never killed a man and the job wasn't one that he enjoyed. Shad was a little scared, too. He wasn't ready to die. But unless some queer trick of fate backed his play it was almost a cinch bet that he would stop one or two of Huntoon's bullets if he gave Bob Huntoon any sort of an even break.

Huntoon was a quick-triggered killer with a braggart's habit of filing notches on the butt of his ivory-handled gun to tally the men he had killed. And Shad Gibson was no better shot than the average brush-popper cowpuncher here in Arizona. While Bob Huntoon was doing his shooting Shad hoped to get that one shot that would kill Huntoon. Beyond that Shad Gibson hoped or asked for nothing. Just

that one shot that would finish that hydrophobia skunk.

He rode past the rock-and-brush stockade corral and branding chute. Past the low-roofed adobe barn. He could see a light burning behind the drawn window blind at Bob Huntoon's cabin. Shad thought it was odd that Huntoon's big brindle ketch dog did not come charging out at him, barking and growling a warning and keeping him in his saddle until Huntoon came to the door. Shad had counted on that big brindle dog fetching Huntoon to his cabin door. But the dog did not come charging out of the brush. Shad Gibson reined up about forty feet from the cabin.

"Come on out, Huntoon!" Shad tried to make his voice sound bold and dangerous. "Come out with your gun in your hand! It's Shad Gibson and I've come to kill you!"

No sound of any kind came from within the cabin. Shad shifted uneasily in his saddle, the palm of his hand wet with nervous sweat as he gripped his cedar-handled six-shooter. He made a plain target as he sat his horse in the moonlight. Huntoon could pick him off from the brush with one shot.

Something akin to panic gripped Shad. He spurred his horse closer to the cabin, alongside the curtained window. The barrel of his six-shooter smashed the windowpane. He struck at the cracked window shade with his gun, tearing it from the nails that held it to the top of the window frame. The fabric caught in the hammer of his gun, cocking it. His finger was pressing the trigger. The gun went off with a loud roar.

Shad's horse jumped, and for a moment or two Shad had all he could do quieting him. He tried to keep an eye on the door and shattered window, expecting Bob Huntoon to start shooting at him. But no sign of the man. No shout. No gun roar.

Shad whirled his lunging horse and spurred him near the window. He got a good look at the inside of the cabin. He saw Bob Huntoon sitting in a chair, his back to the window. He was slumped face down on a table that was littered with playing cards. There was a jug and glasses. A lighted lamp was on the table near the jug.

There was a widening red stain on Huntoon's soiled gray flannel shirt. The man was dead, shot in the back. His white-handled six-shooter was in its holster. Bob Huntoon had been killed without being given a chance to pull his gun.

There was no use in Shad getting off his horse and going into the cabin. Bob Huntoon was dead and that was that. Somebody had beaten Shad Gibson to the killing job, but the killer had committed cold-blooded murder.

Shad started back along the trail. It was as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That heavy, dull aching pain no longer gripped his heart. Bob Huntoon was dead. Shad Gibson had no need now to use his six-shooter.

FOUR riders traveling at a lope loomed up out of the night. They pulled up, barring Shad Gibson's way. The big man with a deputy-sheriff's star pinned to his flannel shirt grinned mirthlessly.

"Whichaway in such a rush, Shad?"

"I'm on my way to the home ranch."

"Bin spendin' the evenin' with Huntoon, I reckon." The big deputy's voice was heavy with sarcasm and his lop-sided grin was ugly. "We heard a shot, Gibson. You kin tell a man somethin' about it, mebby?"

"A shot? Oh. I reckon that was my gun you heard."

"So I kinda figgered. Hand over that gun of yours, Shad. Butt first. Bob Huntoon had better be enjoyin' good health or you'll be in a tight. You're ridin' back with us to Huntoon's place."

"Bob Huntoon," said Shad, his voice brittle with defiance, "is dead. He's bin shot in the back, by the looks of things. Somebody outside the window did the job as Huntoon sat at the table with a jug and a deck of cards. His back's toward the window.

"There was like as not a crack in the window shade. When I hollered and Huntoon didn't come out I smashed the window and tore down the window shade. My six-shooter went off by accident. I didn't kill Bob Huntoon."

"Handcuff him, boys. Yesterday in town he made his war talk. Sayin' that he was goin' to kill Bob Huntoon where he found 'im. Now he's tellin' us this windy about it bein' an accident. Huntoon had Shad Gibson arrested last week for cattle rustlin'. Gibson gits outa jail on bond and keeps his threat to kill Huntoon. Now he's lyin' out of it. Wrap 'im up, boys."

Deputy Sheriff Burt Thrasher's chuckle had menace in it. Thrasher and the dead Bob Huntoon were first cousins. They came from the same part of west Texas. Thrasher's Drag T cattle ranged with Huntoon's Walking H stuff on adjoining ranges. Bob Huntoon looked after both outfits because Burt Thrasher's duties as a peace officer kept him too busy to ride after his stock.

The big deputy led the way back to the Huntoon place. He remarked that it was shore odd that the ketch-dog Brin didn't come out of the brush barking and growling.

"Here's why, Burt," said one of the deputies, pointing to something on the ground at the edge of the brush. "Huntoon's ketch-dog is deader'n a rock. Shot in the head. The carcass drug off here in the brush."

The deputy went into the lighted cabin. He spent nearly half an hour examining the dead body and looking around outside with a lantern for tracks. Now and then he would take a big drink from the dead man's jug. He examined the broken window and the torn shade with a bullet hole in it.

"Looks like Bob was a-settin' here playin' a little game of solitaire and nibblin' at his jug when Shad Gibson here slipped up to the window, sighted Bob through the cracked window blind, and let him have it in the back. It taken just one shot to git the job done."

"Who shot the dog?" questioned Shad. "And does it look like Bob Huntoon would keep on playin' solitaire while I was shootin' his dog? There's just one empty shell in my gun, Thrasher. It would take two cartridges to kill the dog, then Huntoon. And how do you account for these fresh spots of blood over by the door? And does a man handle cards with his gloves on?"

The dead man's hands were covered with brush-scratched buckskin gloves.

There came the sound of shod hoofs outside. One of Burt Thrasher's special deputies challenging somebody in a loud harsh voice. Then a girl's voice, a little shrill with fear or anger or both, giving answer.

"Get out of my way, you big fourflusher!"

THEN a girl dressed in cowpuncher overalls and denim brush jacket, leather chaps and boots and spurs, stood in the doorway. Her face was white under its coating of tan and her reddish brown eyes were angry lights. Jet black hair showed from under her dusty Stetson that was

pulled out of shape from hard usage. She had cried out first at the deputy who tried to stop her; but now she turned to Shad Gibson:

"I tried to head you off, Shad. Why did you do it?"

"You'd orter know the answer to that 'un, Rita," said Deputy-sheriff Burt Thrasher. "You ribbed the trouble between Shad Gibson and my cousin Bob. It was over you, not a few mavericks, that they got to janglin' months ago. Gibson killed Bob Huntoon. Stood outside that window and shot Bob where his galluses cross. He was scared to give Bob Huntoon any kind of a fightin' chance for his taw."

"That's a lie." The girl's voice lost its sharp edge. It was dull, defiant, sullen. "Shad's no bushwhacker."

"Shad Gibson," said the big deputy flatly, "is as guilty as hell. Take him to town, boys. I'll stay here till the coroner gits here. Tell him to fetch a coroner's jury with him and to git here quick. Lock Shad Gibson in jail and throw the key away. Git back home where you belong, Rita."

"I'm going to town with Shad," said the girl.

"No." Shad Gibson grinned faintly at the girl. "You got good eyes and sharp wits, Rita. Take a look around. I didn't kill Huntoon. But somebody did. And nobody stood outside that window and shot Bob Huntoon in the back.

"He wasn't playin' cards with his gloves on. And where's his brush jacket? Huntoon was shot back in the hills and his dead body was fetched here and put in that chair at the table. Take a look at those cards. He was playin' solitaire, says the big law ox. But there's a red four on top of a red trey. A nine of diamonds on a eight of hearts. The rest of the cards is alternatin' black and red.

"Huntoon never got that drunk that he couldn't read his cards. He was a tin-horn gambler when he wasn't workin' at punchin' cows. Gamblers don't make simple card mistakes like that and they don't play with gloves on. Somebody in a hurry was panicky when they spread those cards out on the table.

"And there's three used whisky glasses here on the table. Whoever framed this picture of murder was either drunk or scared or clumsy. Look back in the hills for Huntoon's brush-jacket. See if his runnin' iron is on his saddle. You brag about that streak of Cherokee you've got, Rita. Injuns should know how to read sign. Read all the sign for what it says."

"Take him away, boys," said Burt Thrasher. "Lock 'im up. Don't let anybody git to him. One of you take Rita Wagner to her Campo Ranch. I'm ramroddin' this case and I don't want nobody cuttin' for sign that ain't there. Git goin'. Rita, you keep plumb outa this. You start gittin' underfoot and you'll git Shad Gibson hung and your brother Tom into a mess. I'm a-tellin' you straight."

Shad Gibson stared hard and long into the big deputy's bloodshot green eyes. Then he spoke to the girl, his voice flat-toned and heavy with defeat.

"Burt Thrasher is right, Rita. Ride on home. There ain't any sign to cut for. I rode here and killed Bob Huntoon. I'll take my medicine. Don't do anything that will git Tom into this mess."

Rita Wagner looked hard at Shad, then at the grinning deputy, then back at the blue-eyed, tow-headed Shad Gibson.

"Just as you say, Shad. I'll go back to the Campo Ranch."

CHAPTER II

IRISH AND TEQUILA MIX

THERE were four lawyers in the cow town of Campo, Arizona, near the Mexican Border. One of them was Miles Huntoon, brother of the murdered man. Miles Huntoon was the justice of peace; he enjoyed the reputation of sending enemies of his to prison for enough years to keep them out of circulation until their hair grew white and they tripped over their long whiskers.

A clever man with a disarming smile and suave manner that could, in a split second, turn into something as vitriolic as deadly acid. He could wheedle, flatter, bewilder or browbeat a jury into rendering a verdict of guilty. A dangerous man to have for an enemy, this tall, darkly handsome and well groomed Miles Huntoon.

The second attorney, who said that four shysters in one cow town amounted to a crowd and at least three too many, was Patrick Henry Connity. Pat Connity was a quart-a-day man with wrinkled, liquor-spotted clothes and a cutting wit. Disbarred in the East somewhere, he had come to Arizona, sobered up enough to pass the bar examinations, and settled down at Campo with a law library as shabby and stained as his clothes.

He drank tequila because it was the cheapest liquor a man could buy along the Mexican Border. A dog that showed the predominating strain of Irish terrier, and called O'Banion, was his constant companion. O'Banion ate sometimes when Pat Connity went hungry.

Patrick Henry, so rumor had drifted out of the man's vague past, had at one time been a criminal lawyer, who had ranked among the best until whisky, a woman and a stroke of bad luck had lost him a large practice and all he had back East. Pat Connity was handling the cattle-rustling case pending against Shad Gibson.

The other two attorneys hardly mattered. One was the lawyer for the big copper-mining company and his job occupied all his time and paid him too well for him to dabble with outside cases. His name was Dwight Smith. A dapper, shrewd man.

The other was an Arizona-born man of Mexican parentage, and he handled cases for the Mexicans who got into any sort of legal difficulties. Carlos Murillo had a buxom church-going wife and half a dozen children who liked to visit Pat Connity's cabin because he told them colorful Irish stories about the Little People of Ireland and how Saint Patrick drove the snakes into the sea so that there were no rattlesnakes to be found on the soil of Ireland.

On Sundays when Patrick Henry Connity shaved and bathed and put on a clean suit and shirt and went to mass Señora Murillo invited him to Sunday dinner. O'Banion shared the food given the numerous Murillo dogs and was attentive to the collie Queen Isabella.

On St. Patrick's day Pat Connity took a folded Irish flag—a golden harp on a green background—from his tin-covered trunk. He and the Murillo youngsters would fasten it to a flagpole in front of Pat Connity's adobe cabin. And on that day, when the Murillo tribe had departed, Pat Connity would get a little drunker than usual, sing Irish songs and flavor his talk with Gaelic.

From the window of his little adobe cabin Patrick Henry Connity saw the sheriff's posse ride into town with Shad Gibson. Shad, with his feet tied in the stirrups and his handcuffed hands tied to his rope-marked saddle horn.

O'Banion barked. Pat Connity lurched to the cabin doorway, his shock of reddish gray hair tousled, his face brick red, his eyes as blue and bright as the sky in spite of the tequila he had consumed. It was sunrise and Pat Connity had been up all night.

"What's the charge this time, lad?" He stumbled a little as he stepped out into the dusty street of Campo and halted the two deputies and their prisoner.

"They claim I murdered Bob Huntoon, Pat." Shad's grin was forced.

"Hell, Connity," said one of the special deputies, "go back to your bunk and sleep it off. You can't spring Shad Gibson on this 'un. He done confessed in front of witnesses. He's as good as hung. You can't git him out with one of them babees corpses and there ain't enough money in Arizona to git him out on bond. Shad Gibson is a gone goslin!"

"If he shot Bob Huntoon I'll whittle him a wooden medal. I'll be over as soon as I give O'Banion his breakfast, Shadrock. If you killed Black Bob Huntoon 'twas self defense and not murder."

Shad's grin was stiff-lipped. "Burt Thrasher gave these brave hombres orders to lock me up and throw the key away. I killed Bob Huntoon, Pat. I'm willin' to hang for it. There ain't a thing you kin do. I'm obliged, just the same."

The two special deputies rode on with their prisoner. O'Banion whined softly. Pat Connity stumbled back into his cabin, his dog at his heels.

PAT CONNITY fed O'Banion the sirloin steak he had bought yesterday. The wire-haired reddish dog wagged his stump of a tail, his ragged ears cocked perplexedly, his brown eyes looking up at the man he worshipped.

"There's somethin' more than the killin' of Black Bob Huntoon," said Pat Connity, "that's botherin' our young friend Shadrock. Otherwise he'd have given you the top of the mornin', O'Banion. The lad's no murderer. No forked-tongue Miles Huntoon and one of his packed juries is hangin' the lad. Now eat your steak."

The dog left the meat almost untouched on his dish. Pat Connity made a wry face as he poured out a drink and tossed it off. He put the bottle away in a cupboard.

"When the O'Banion leaves a steak untouched and tequila tastes like gall and wormwood juice in the mouth of Patrick Henry Connity," said the attorney, " 'tis time for us to be doin' something to remedy such a disastrous situation."

He went to the back door and called across the arroyo toward the white-walled adobe dwelling of Carlos Murillo.

"Aurelio! Panchito! Pasqual! Joaquin! *Pronto, muchachos!* And fetch the buckets! Only the caballeros this morning. The little *señoritas* can come over later."

There was an adobe-walled well in back. A large wooden bucket with rope and pulley and windlass. Five minutes later Patrick Henry Connity stood in a little shed near the well, stripped to the waist and wearing faded cotton jeans. Four small Mexican boys hauled up pail after pail of very cold water and sloshed it over the man's head and torso. Jabbering and laughing and enjoying their fun. Until Pat Connity stood there shivering and wet and cold sober. Then he dried himself with a rough towel until his hide glowed.

Then he sent the boys home with their empty tin pails and each with a piece of candy and two extra pieces of the chocolate sweet.

"One for Margarita, one for Lupe. We mustn't ever forget the little *señoritas*."

The oldest boy, Aurelio, was back in a few minutes with a clean white shirt and a white linen suit that had been cleaned and pressed by the Señora Murillo.

"Mama says to dress quick and come to the breakfast before she get cold."

"Thank the *señora* and tell her that I'll be right over and to put whiskers on the coffee. O'Banion will share a steak, perhaps, with Queen Isabella. Your mama is the uncanonized Saint of Campo. I'll be there quicker than you can say Jack Robinson."

"Jack Robinson," promptly said the fourteen-year-old Aurelio. Then he was gone.

LESS than an hour later Pat Connity sat in the office of Judge Miles Huntoon. There was no smile on Pat Connity's tanned red face and no trace of stagger in his gait as he walked into the office and sat down without invitation. His shirt and white linen suit were spotless and he wore a green necktie. His sky-blue eyes were hard and cold, his voice brittle.

"Your brother Bob has been killed. My client Shadrock Gibson is in jail accused of murder. I want to know the score, Huntoon."

"That's the exact score, Connity. Bob Huntoon was shot in the back. Shad Gibson has admitted the murder. Made a confession before substantial witnesses. Hanging is too quick and merciful a punishment for the man who murdered my brother.

"I'm sending Shad Gibson to Yuma Prison for the rest of his natural life. That's all, Connity. Take your cur with you when you go out. I hate dogs and fleas bother me."

"You're not, however, bothered a bit by lice. I want to see my client Shadrock Gibson. I'm his attorney; you are bound by the laws of Arizona to allow a prisoner to see his lawyer. Or are you familiar with Arizona law?"

Miles Huntoon's dark, handsome face flushed. His pale gray eyes were like ice.

"The prisoner has confessed. He needs no lawyer. However, if you think it will do you any good—" Miles Huntoon called to one of the men who had brought Shad Gibson to town.

"Take Connity over to jail. Let him talk to Shad Gibson through the bars. Search him first. We don't want our eminent barrister slipping his client a gun or knife or a key to the jail."

Pat Connity submitted to the humiliating formality of being searched for concealed weapons. O'Banion growled.

"Take it easy, O'Banion. You've had breakfast. You should know that if you took a bite of that kind of meat you'd die of poison."

But at the jail Pat Connity was able to get nothing out of Shad Gibson.

"Thanks, Pat. But you can't do me any good."

"You sign a confession, Shadrock, and I'll have you declared insane. You're covering for somebody or I'm a Chinaman. So long."

Pat Connity was harnessing his sorrel team Cork and Kerry and the six small Murillos were greasing the wheels of his buckboard, when Rita Wagner rode up on a sweat marked horse.

"The top of the mornin', Rita. You've saved me a drive in the heat of the day."

He pulled the harness off his team while Rita Wagner stabled her horse and the young Murillos were finally on their way home across the arroyo.

From Rita Wagner the attorney got the story of the killing of Black Bob Huntoon. Pat Connity listened in silence, interrupting now and then to get straight some detail. In the end he nodded slowly, a troubled thought clouding his bright blue eyes.

"Shad has confessed to that murder, Pat," the girl said in a low tone she tried to make steady, "because he thinks my brother Tom did the killing. Shad may not believe that Tom is guilty, but he is afraid that they will somehow prove it and that Tom will be sent to Yuma."

"Yuma," said Pat Connity, "would sober up that wild young brother of yours. Where is he? Where was he last evening or last night when Bob Huntoon was shot in the back?"

"I don't know, Pat. He hasn't been at the ranch for nearly a week. He might be at the Vidal ranch across the Border. I'd rather be skinned alive than ride there but if I have to, I will. Rosita Vidal—"

"The Golden Rose of San Luis." Pat Connity's smile was tight-lipped, grim. "You don't need to humiliate yourself to that extent, Rita. Tom will show up. Our Golden Rose might furnish him with an alibi. She'd perjure herself if there was enough money in it. She might furnish a real alibi for Tom at that.

"Your brother Tom has his faults but the boy's no murderer. He's been mixed up with Black Bob Huntoon in some Mexican cattle rustling and Burt Thrasher has something on him and Tom had that ugly quarrel with Shadrock Gibson. But he wouldn't murder Bob Huntoon even if he was afraid of Black Bob.

"For all his wildness he's got too much courage for cold-blooded murder. The thing's an ugly mess. If Shadrock Gibson puts his name to a signed confession, there's no stopping Miles Huntoon from sending that lad to Yuma. So we've got to act fast and make no mistakes."

"But how, Pat? What can we do?"

"Is Pecos Driscoll at the ranch?"

"Pecos is ramrodding a pack spread that's catching wild cattle in the mountains," said the girl. I sent a Mexican out to tell him to come to town. He'll be here before dark."

"Locate Pecos. Tell him to get to town after dark and not before. To be riding a fast horse and leading another good horse. A saddled horse, Rita, with a Winchester in the saddle scabbard, a belt full of cartridges and a six-shooter hanging from the saddle horn. Tell him to come to my barn. He'll find me here at my house."

"You mean, Pat, that you're going to—"

"Never ask Patrick Henry Connity questions, colleen. Now scratch the O'Banion's ears and be goin'. This tie is chokin' me and I'm gettin' this clean suit wrinkled.

"I'm tryin' somethin' new in the way of a habeas corpus that ain't in any volume of Blackstone. And keep your head in the stars, colleen."

CHAPTER III

BLACK-AND-GOLD TRAIL

THE day had been sultry. At dusk the heat lightning reddened the desert sky in the far distance. A huge black cloud rolled up out of Mexico and the heavy electrical storm broke an hour before midnight.

Shad Gibson had watched the brilliantly colored sunset from his barred jail window. The dusk was hot and sticky and it bathed him with sweat. There was no sleep for the young cowpuncher and he stood by the little barred window and watched the chain lightning split the black sky.

The rush of a heavy wind sent sheets of cooling rain through the barred window. Shad stood there, letting the rain drench him, cooling his hot body, washing away the dull headache that had tortured him all day. Lightning and thunder crashed. He thought it must be the noisy force of the storm that rattled the iron bars of his cell door.

Then a voice that was vaguely familiar called his name. A big key fumbled at the heavy lock. The cell door opened. The man's voice sounded through the thunder of the storm.

"It's me, Shad. Pecos Driscoll. Rattle your hocks. We're headin' for what the feller calls the wide open spaces. Buckle on this six-shooter."

A white flash of lightning showed the tall, rawboned, homely faced ramrod of the big Campo Ranch. Pecos Driscoll, the brush-popper cowhand who was trying to hold together the big Border cow outfit that young Tom Wagner had been gambling away since his father's death a couple of years ago.

Pecos had a six-shooter in one hand. His free hand gripped Shad Gibson's arm, propelling him towards the open jail door and the stormy night outside.

A lightning flash showed Burt Thrasher's two special deputies behind the bars of a locked cell. They were tied and gagged. Blood from a smashed nose reddened the face of one man. The other lay with his eyes closed, blood oozing from a scalp wound. Both men were unconscious.

Pecos led the way through the night to a patch of mesquite brush where two saddled horses stood tied, rumps to the driving rain.

They mounted and rode away. As they passed the lighted cabin of Attorney at Law Patrick Henry Connity they could see that gentleman lazing in the doorway, a bottle of tequila in his hand, the terrier O'Banion beside his master, ragged ears erect, stubby tail wagging.

Pat Connity saluted with the bottle as they rode past at a long lope. Then the cabin door closed.

"Drunk or sober," said Pecos, the rush of the storm tearing the words from his unshaved lips, "there's a feller that will shore do to take along. Him and his six-shooter habeas corpus. He said to ask you did you sign ary kind of a confession, Shad."

"No. I signed nothin', Pecos."

"Then," said the big cowpuncher, "we won't have to stick up Miles Huntoon on our way outa town to git ary signed confession away from him. After all, it's ag'in' the law to shoot one of them judges."

THEY rode at a long trot, their horses sloshing through mud and water. Pecos Driscoll said he didn't reckon there was any big rush because Deputy Sheriff Burt Thrasher was somewhere on the trail to Campo with the coroner and a special deputy or two and maybe the dead body of Black Bob Huntoon, on their way back to town.

"And we're headed acrost the Mexican Border," Pecos finished. "You kin hole-up at the Vidal ranch. Rosita will keep you from gettin' too lonesome."

"To hell with Rosita!" Shad Gibson exploded.

Pecos Driscoll chuckled. "Them's Pat Connity's orders, Shad. He's got a notion you might find out somethin' from the Golden Rose of San Luis as he calls Rosita. Find out from her where Tom Wagner has bin keepin' hisself for the past week. If Tom and Black Bob fetched ary Mexican cattle through the pass on the Vidal grant. Kinda check up on young Tom. Them's Pat Connity's orders."

"Pat thinks Tom killed Black Bob Huntoon?"

"I don't know what Pat Connity thinks," replied Pecos. "He's a hard man to figger out. But bet on this. He ain't sendin' you to the Vidal ranch just to git you acrost the Mexican line where Burt Thrasher can't arrest you.

"You stuck your head in a hangin' loop because you had a notion Tom Wagner mighta killed Black Bob Huntoon. Burt Thrasher kinda threatened you into it, knowin' how you feel to'rd the Little Boss. She done told me about it when she sent me to town to yank you outa jail." Rita Wagner was the Little Boss to Pecos Driscoll.

"Nobody hired me, son. Pat Connity and the Little Boss asked me to git you outa the calaboose. I didn't need no hirin' to do you a favor. I come over the Tascosa trail from Texas with your daddy Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner. All three of us young fellers.

"Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner got married and settled down and I invested my wages in rot-gut likker and bob-tail flushes. Bill and Pete got me out of a bad tight and Pat Connity helped 'em. You're Bill Gibson's boy Shad. I'm workin' for Pete Wagner's little girl Rita. Yeah, and for young Tom, even if he is an ornery young whelp.

"I'd be dead or dyin' slow in Yuma prison right now if it hadn't bin for Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner and Pat Connity. And there's somethin' I never told nobody but Pat Connity. Bill Gibson wasn't drug to death by a horse four years ago. He was knocked on the head and his foot hung in the stirrup to make it look like he'd bin drug to death by his horse. And it was three-four white men, not a bunch of Mexican rebels that killed Pete Wagner just south of the border."

"You're certain of that, Pecos?"

"Dead certain. I read the sign and I know. But Pat Connity told me that the time wasn't ripe to do anything about it. There was no proof. There never will be no proof till somebody talks. And the men that did them two killin's ain't the talkin' kind."

"My dad didn't have an enemy in the country that I know of, Pecos. Pete Wagner, so far as I know, didn't have any enemies either. Who would want to murder 'em?"

"Bill Gibson owned one of the best small outfits in Arizona. Plenty of water even in drought years. And it lays next to the Mexican line. If Bill had wanted to handle what we called wet cattle along the Rio Grande where big drives of stolen Mexican cattle was crossed when the moon was right, he could have made a big fortune.

"But Bill Gibson wouldn't have nothin' to do with Border renegades. You know that. The ranch is yourn now and you've kept that Border closed the same as your daddy did."

"He made me promise him that not long before he died, Pecos. The Border along my place is closed with a ten wire fence. It stays that way. When I want Mexican cattle I ride down into Sonora and buy 'em from their Mexican owners. Cross 'em at the inspection station."

"But that Half-circle G ranch of yourn would be the purtiest ranch on the Mexican Border for anybody that likes the big profits that kin be made handlin' wet cattle. That's why Square Bill Gibson was killed. That's why somebody would like to see Shad Gibson shot or hung or sent to the Yuma pen so that they could git a-holt of the Half-circle G ranch. That's why Black Bob Huntoon was killed and you got framed for the killin'."

"When you put it like that, Pecos, it makes me plain dumb for not seein' through the game."

"Kinda dumb, at that," Pecos agreed. He reached over and slapped Shad on the back. "The Campo ranch joins yourn on the north. It's a big layout. Them same fellers want the Campo Ranch. So they murdered Pete Wagner like they had murdered Bill Gibson a year or two before."

"Nobody ever offered to buy me out. Nobody, so far as I know, ever offered to buy out Pete Wagner."

"They didn't have the money to buy either outfit. Besides, why pay money when a couple of killin's kin do the job? Ca'tridges is cheap."

THE storm had blown over and the stars were beginning to show. The moon pushed itself from behind the black clouds. Pecos and Shad had left the town of Campo far behind.

Their wet clothes were beginning to dry out. The night breeze following the rain was chilly. Shad shivered inside his wet denim brush jacket. Pecos pulled up as they topped a ridge that was spotted with mesquite and palo verde and cactus. He fished a quart bottle from the deep pocket of his bullhide chaps.

"Here's where I turn back. And yonder is Mexico and in an hour you'll be eatin' breakfast at the Vidal Ranch. A little dram of Pat Connity's tequila will take the chill out of our gizzards. Drink hearty."

"I'm kinda leary of the stuff, Pecos. I nursed Dad through some bad drunks. They claim he was drunk when—"

"Mebby he was and mebby he wasn't. Mebby booze made him keerless and he let some feller he trusted knock him over the head with the barrel of a six-shooter. But Bill Gibson wasn't the drinkin' man some claimed him to be.

"Your mother dyin' kinda throwed him and he would drink too much when he got to grievin'. But Bill Gibson wasn't no drunkard. And you're too damn stubborn and mule headed to let it git a tail-holt on you. Drink hearty. It'd be a mighty good idee for you to smell of likker when you show up at the Vidal ranch. Let Rosita think you're doin' a littl bottle h'istin'. Savvy?"

Pecos Driscoll took a long drink and handed the half-empty bottle to Shad.

"I poured me about half this bottle into a pint flask that'll take me to camp. You shove this in your chaps pocket, Shad. Take another snort just before you git to the Vidal Ranch. Act like you was feelin' shore loose and careless, savvy?

"You've just broke jail at Campo and you're on the dodge in Mexico. You're Give-a-damn Gibson and Rosita Vidal is the Golden Rose of San Luis and the purtiest thing in the wide world. Her old man, Don Pablo, is your Mexican neighbor and *muy simpatica*. Play the game thataway and see what happens.

"Beat Tom Wagner's time with the *señorita*. Listen with both ears when Don Pablo hints about you and him makin' a hidden gate in that barb-wire fence between the Half-circle G ranch and the Vidal Grant. They'll be playin' you like a fisherman plays a trout.

"But when you're holdin' hands in the moonlight with the Golden Rose, use your left hand. Keep your gun hand free and close to your six-shooter."

Shad nodded. "Rosita ain't as bad as the talk says she is. But she's not my kind. The Golden Rose of San Luis is out of my class. I'm just a cowhand."

"She thinks you'll do to take along," grinned Pecos. "Play your cards like you was holdin' aces. But remember this, son. That Golden Rose of San Luis ain't no flower. She's plenty dangerous. Men have killed one another to ketch her eye. She'd knife a man in the back if he doublecrossed her. Well, so long, Shad. Good luck. I'll be somewheres not too far off if you git into a tight."

Pecos Driscoll rode off into the night. Shad Gibson rode the moonlit trail toward the Vidal Ranch across the Mexican Border.

IT WAS nearing dawn and Shad was following a trail that led from the upper end of the Vidal Grant to Bob Huntoon's place. The cloven hooves of Mexican cattle had deepened the trail to a wide ditch in places where the ground was soft. On either side were patches of catclaw and mesquite and palo verdes. Giant sujuaro cactus stood like ghostly sentinels against the paling sky.

Few honest men ever traveled this trail. The Border Patrol cursed it as they tried in vain with their short-handed force of officers to stop the leak of Mexican cattle.

Shad's horse shied at something that lay on the ground, half hidden by the brush. Shad, lost in brooding thought, started, jerked his six-shooter. Then he pulled up, grinned faintly when he made certain nobody was hidden in the brush, and dismounted.

He picked up the thing that had spooked his horse. It was a faded denim brush-jacket, sodden from the recent rain. It was buttoned and the sleeves were knotted around the body of the jumper which contained some bulky package. Knotted saddle strings completed the wrapping of the denim bundle.

Hefting it in his hand, Shad took careful note of his surroundings. The trail here crossed a dry wash. A few hours ago during the heavy rain the dry wash had been filled with water that made a swift flowing little river. The water had washed the bundle down from somewhere above in the foothills and it had lodged in the brush along the trail.

Shad untied the knotted sleeves and cut the leather strings. A money belt made of soft-oiled whang leather dropped out of the jumper and onto the ground. The pockets of the money belt, closed by glove snaps, were bulgy. Shad opened them, one by one.

Each of the ten pockets held a roll of currency. The money was hardly damp. There was no time now to count it all. But the contents of one pocket tallied up to an even thousand dollars. Shad counted it and replaced it in the pocket. Then he buckled on the money belt beneath his shirt.

There was a tally book in the buttoned breast pocket of the denim brush-jacket. It was wet and the pages stuck together. He found a dry match and by its light he read the name on the inside of the leather cover—Bob Huntoon.

In the back of the jacket was a round hole big enough for Shad to run a forefinger through. Bob Huntoon had been wearing this brush-jacket when he was shot in the back.

"It's a thousand-to-one bet," Shad Gibson told himself as he rolled the brush-jumper and tied it on his saddle, then mounted, "that Bob Huntoon was wearin' this filled money belt when he was killed. That whoever killed him was scared to be caught with that money.

"So he pulled off Black Bob's jacket, wrapped the money belt in it, tied 'er in a bundle and cached it somewheres above here. The rain washed it down here. And that's that. The man or men that bushwhacked Bob Huntoon killed him for this money.

"But where did Bob Huntoon git that much money? Where was he takin' it? Why didn't the killer or killers keep the money? Who did they think might search 'em for it?"

CHAPTER IV

PERILOUS HACIENDA

PABLO VIDAL, better known as Don Pablo, owner of the somewhat impoverished old San Luis Grant, was a product of the revolutions that had swept over Mexico time after time. He had changed sides whenever he could anticipate which faction would tomorrow be in power.

The last successful rebellion had netted him the vast San Luis Grant in reward for services such as the running of guns and ammunition and stolen gringo horses to the rebels. But bands of rebel raiders, federal soldiers and gringo cattle rustlers had sadly depleted the once great herds of cattle that wore the original brand of the San Luis Grant. The brand was a four-petal flower like a four leaf clover that was known along the Border as the Rose of San Luis.

So Don Pablo, rich in land but poor in cattle, shrewd in the ways of making money along the Border and poisoned by a bitter hatred for more fortunate owners of ranches on both sides of the Mexican Line, was playing a dangerous but lucrative game. His vaqueros were the best that money could hire. He mounted them on the fastest cow horses in Sonora. He paid them well and they followed his orders.

The result was that many cattle grazing on the vast Vidal Grant wore blotched brands and were drifted soon after branding across the border into Arizona. With the money thus gained, Don Pablo would buy cattle that were brought across the Border from Arizona and New Mexico.

But Don Pablo was not satisfied. Instead of hundreds there should be thousands of cattle wearing his Rose of San Luis brand and fattening on his huge Vidal Grant. Don Pablo was an ambitious man. If he could only form a working partnership with some rich gringo who could obtain the ownership of the Half-circle G and the big Campo ranches, then in a few years men would be calling Don Pablo the biggest cattleman along the Mexican border.

Put a gate in that Gibson fence, trail through that gateway the cows that Don Pablo's vaqueros would steal from his Mexican neighbors and enemies, breed those cows to shorthorn and hereford bulls, graze those cattle on both sides of the Mexican Border—then Don Pablo's great dream of a cattleman's empire would come true. His Vidal Ranch would straddle the Mexican line for more than fifty miles on either side.

"Say prayers," he told his fat, sad-eyed *señora*, "until there are callouses on your thick knees. Burn a thousand

candles to the Lady of Guadalupe. Go to every mass that always begging padre of yours holds in the church. Give him some money, not too much, for his always starving peons. You are my wife. Do your duty."

And to his daughter Rosita he would say, "Waste not your time on these guitar-playing caballeros who own nothing but their clothes and a sore-backed horse. Play up to that young gringo, Tomas Wagner. Sing to him, make eyes at him, feed him more wine. He and his sister own the big Campo ranch. And the next time that other gringo Shad Gibson comes, make him think that he is the one. Once you had him eating out of your hand, no?"

"No. Shad Gibson eats from no woman's hand. But let it pass, Papa. The next time will be different. If there comes a next time. *Por Dios,* there is a man, that tow head."

"Keep your head on your shoulders. Keep your heart free. I will tell you when it is time to fall in love with a man. You will marry that man. He is the man who will own the Gibson and Wagner ranches."

"What is his name, Papa? Miles Huntoon?" Rosita's dark eyes, golden in the sunlight, were as innocent now as a baby's. Her voice silky.

"Quien sabe? Who can tell? I have more than one branding iron in the fire. More than one gringo in mind. The best man will win. My Rose of San Luis brand will be marked on him and burned on the hides of his cattle. The Vidal Rancho will reach far across the gringo side of the Border. When I die it will belong to you, the Golden Rose. Now don't bother me with silly questions."

DON PABLO was at the long low-roofed barn when Shad Gibson rode up to the Vidal ranch. The old San Luis Rancho that was like a small Mexican village with its many building, its corrals, its church.

The old Spanish bell in the old church was calling the faithful to six o'clock mass. The Señora Vidal, dressed in black, a black *rebozo* over her graying head, led a procession of men, women and children into the church. Shad saw Rosita join the procession. She saw him, recognized him, dropped a few paces behind her mother and waved. Shad lifted his hat.

"Señor Shad Gibson!" Don Pablo, lean, hawk-beaked, black-eyed, his thick iron gray moustache trimmed, his lean, muscled body clad in a shabby leather charro jacket and tight-fitting trousers that flared wide where they met his high-heeled boots and huge rowled silver-crusted spurs, doffed his big sombrero which was crusted with gold and silver threaded designs. *"Compadre mio!* Caballero!"

"Don Pablo!" Shad grinned, his hat in his hand. *"Señor!"*

Pablo Vidal spoke English with hardly a trace of Mexican accent. His sharp black eyes noticed the neck of the tequila bottle protruding from the pocket of Shad's brush-scarred chaps. The black eyes glinted. The smile twisted faintly.

"Get down, my young friend," he said in English. "You look weary. Come on to the house. The women have gone to church. We'll have a quiet little drink before they get back to the house, eh?"

A barefooted peon took Shad's horse. He unbuckled his chaps, grinning as the almost empty tequila bottle fell on the ground. Don Pablo smiled and kicked the bottle aside.

"I have better liquor than that at the house. Tequila is for Mexicans. I have rye whiskey that is twenty years old. You are celebrating some holiday, no, my friend?"

"A holiday from Yuma prison," said Shad. "I broke jail last night at Campo. They had me locked up for killing Bob Huntoon."

"Madre de Dios! For killing that one they should give you a reward."

There was no reading anything in the black eyes of Don Pablo, but Shad detected an odd note in the Mexican's voice. Something almost like alarm. Bob Huntoon had been killed between his place and the Vidal Ranch. Had he been on his way to or from Don Pablo's ranch with that belt filled with money?

"Deputy-sheriff Burt Thrasher," said Shad, "and Judge Miles Huntoon have other ideas. But their law can't reach across the Mexican Border."

"My house is yours, my friend. Yon are safe here from anything or anybody. You have my promise for that."

Shad thanked Don Pablo as the latter led the way to the rambling hacienda. Inside the three-foot adobe walls it was cool and the light that came through the barred windows was soft and gray in the huge living room.

Patterned Mexican tiles floored the house. Hand-carved, richly upholstered old furniture filled the room. Hand-embroidered Spanish tapestries hung on the plastered walls. Spanish rugs in soft colors.

Don Pablo led the way through the huge living room and into a smaller room that had leather-bound chairs and a huge flat-topped desk. The heavy black-walnut desk was covered with papers and books, writing materials, a box of Mexican cigars.

"On Sunday mornings when the visiting padre manages to get here," explained Don Pablo, "the *doña* gathers every human being on the place and herds them to mass. All but the heathen Indio who took your horse. And myself. Me, I lost what belief I ever had in their *Señor Dios* when I was a boy. When I saw my father and mother, my sisters and brothers butchered by the church-going soldiers of Porfirio Diaz.

"So the servants are on their knees over yonder, and breakfast will have to wait. And I'll have to serve the drinks."

Shad had emptied the bulk of the tequila in his bottle on the ground, spilling enough on his clothes to leave a strong odor of the stuff. That one drink he had taken had long ago worn off. But he did his best to act tipsy. The drink of whisky Don Pablo gave him hit his empty stomach like liquid fire, warming him all over. He no longer had to pretend. He was tipsy.

"I'm an outlaw now, Don Pablo. I can't go back to my ranch. They'll put a price on my head and hunt me down. Thrasher and Bob Huntoon had already framed a cattle-rustlin' charge against me. Now they're after me for murder. I can't even cross the Border to gather my own cattle."

"The gathering of your cattle, my friend, can be arranged. I'll buy your cattle. My vaqueros can round up every head you own in a week. If there was only a gate in that fence you father built along the Border, it would save much time and a long drive around through the inspection station."

Shad toyed with his second drink, nodding doubtfully. "It could be arranged, perhaps, *señor.* We can talk about it later. Right now I'd like to clean up some before I meet the others. I need a shave and a bath and—"

"And some sleep, no? I have clean clothes that will fit you. This is your home, my *amigo.*"

There was a sunken bath tub of Mexican onyx. A razor and strop and soap that reeked of perfume. A big hand-carved Spanish bed. Outside the barred window a fountain splashed in the patio and birds sang in the old fruit trees. Shad cached the money belt under the hard mattress and shoved his six-shooter under his pillow before he dropped off into a tipsy, dream-racked slumber.

IT WAS noon when he awoke. There was clear cold water in the onyx tub and clean clothes laid out on a chair. He looked under the mattress. The filled money belt was still there. He sloshed in the cold water until the dull pain in his head was gone. Then he dressed in a suit of soft leather charro clothes and soft white shirt. His boots had been polished and put with the clean clothes.

Before he buckled on the money belt next to his skin he counted its contents. Ten thousand dollars. The brand tally book with Bob Huntoon's name in it was still too wet to permit handling. He put it back into the money belt with the currency. The book might contain some sort of important data.

He hesitated about buckling on his cartridge belt. It was hardly in accordance with polite manners to go around a host's house wearing a belt full of cartridges and a six-shooter. But he knew that Don Pablo always carried a hidden gun. Shad finally compromised by shoving his six-shooter into the waistband of the tight fitting charro pants and covering it with his shirt. He dropped a dozen cartridges into his pockets.

He took a long look at himself in the large gilt-framed mirror. A clean-shaven, tanned, tow-headed cowpuncher in Mexican charro clothes of soft brown leather. A narrow red sash around his middle. A black necktie.

"All I need," he muttered at his reflection, "is a guitar and some moonlight."

Señora Vidal was nowhere around. Don Pablo made her excuses for her. She was off somewhere in the buckboard with the padre visiting the families of the Mexicans who had been unable to attend mass.

Rosita, Don Pablo said, was taking her siesta. They had expected Shad to sleep through the day.

"So you and I, my *amigo,*" said Don Pablo, smiling, "will eat and smoke and talk and perhaps we shall get to know one another better. *Quien sabe?*"

So Don Pablo had sent the good *doña* off with the brown-frocked padre to get them both away from the hacienda. And Rosita would go on shift after sundown. Meanwhile the wily Don Pablo would get the gringo in a melow mood and see about the opening of a gate in the ten-wire Border fence, about the purchase of the Half-circle G cattle, the lease or outright purchase, perhaps, of the Gibson ranch.

The meal was what a hungry man would dream about. The whisky was aged and mellow. Shad rolled his own cigarettes from tobacco and brown papers furnished by his host. The talk was pleasant. To Shad's surprise no mention was made concerning the fence or the buying of the Half-circle G cattle. Don Pablo was the perfect Mexican host. And the world can show no finer host than the true Mexican.

Shad Gibson was puzzled and on guard. Behind all this suave hospitality was a sinister and dangerous and treacherous something that put him on his guard. He got the feeling that behind that suave and genial and smiling manner Don Pablo was uneasy and nervous and as tense as a coiled rattler ready to strike.

Shad used his left hand to lift his drinks and hold his cigarette. His right hand never got more than a few inches from his gun. His ears kept listening for sounds beyond the thick adobe walls of Don Pablo's private office and smoking room. His eyes kept shifting toward the outer window that faced the barn and corrals. Now and then toward the other barred window that looked out on the patio.

And the eyes and ears of Don Pablo were just as alert as those of his gringo guest. It was like a game of two-handed poker. Don Pablo was the first to weaken and come to the point.

"You seem uneasy, my *amigo.*" He smiled.

"I'm a hunted man, *señor.* When a man is hunted like an animal he must keep his eyes open and his ears cocked." Shad used the Mexican language. "And you, *señor?* Who is it you are expecting?"

"I have my enemies. Perhaps those enemies saw you ride here. Besides, I am expecting someone. Friend or enemy. *Quien sabe?* It is hard to tell. I lead a dangerous life, my friend. Who are they who know you have ridden here to my rancho? Who and how many?"

THE question came like a thrown knife. Don Pablo was leaning forward in his chair, brown, long fingered hands gripping the edge of his flat-topped desk. His eyes were red-black coals. His voice had the sharpness of a honed steel blade.

That last drink of whisky had dulled Shad's nerves so that the quick thrust of the question lost its sharpness. He grinned and spoke slowly, his voice an Arizonan's drawl, his blue eyes hard and unflinching as he voiced his deliberate lie.

"Nobody knows where I am, Don Pablo. If I'm gettin' you in wrong by ridin' here, it's time I saddle my horse and drifted yonderly. I've still got the rest of Mexico to hide out in. Just what's on your mind, *señor?*"

"Did you kill Bob Huntoon?"

"I'm accused of it. If I stood trial I'd hang for it."

"You confessed."

"Then you've had visitors from Campo. That should teach me a lesson about drinkin' so much I drop off into a drunken stupor. They're here after me?"

Don Pablo shook his head. "One of my vaqueros rode in from Campo while you were asleep. He brought the news."

Likewise, Shad told himself, the vaquero had fetched a message from Miles Huntoon or Burt Thrasher.

"The reward on my hide?" Shad grinned mirthlessly.

"Ten thousand dollars!" Don Pablo's voice was cold.

Shad, on guard now, managed an easy grin. His voice lost nothing of its drawl. His eyes were blue and hard and steady.

"That's a lot of money, *señor.* More than my hide is worth. It's as much as my whole outfit's worth. Ten thousand dollars reward for my scalp don't sound right to me. There must be a mistake somewheres."

"There is no mistake," Don Pablo spoke in his carefully chosen, clipped English. "The reward is ten thousand dollars. Dead or alive."

"You'd make a nice little profit by killin' me, *señor.*"

Shad leaned back in his chair, thumbs hooked in the

red silk sash around his middle. His right hand touched the butt of the six-shooter beneath his borrowed white silk shirt. There was a hard, tight grin on his mouth.

If Don Pablo had a gun hidden beenath the top of his desk now was the time he could go after it and try his luck. Shad was ready for him.

"I would not doublecross a true friend," said Don Pablo, "for a million dollars in gold. But I would kill an enemy just to watch him kick his way into Hell. I have proved both facts more than once during my life.

"The reward placed on your head is not offered by Arizona. It is a private matter. Perhaps you are in a position to understand my meaning. Perhaps you know why the amount of the reward is ten thousand dollars and no more, no less. Eh?"

Don Pablo's two hands still gripped the edge of his desk. He was leaning forward, tense as a man about to leap.

Shad knew that it was a question of split-seconds who could draw and shoot first. Shad, ready to tip his chair over sideways and draw his gun and shoot, was framing in his mind the answer to Don Pablo's question.

The door opened suddenly. Don Pablo and Shad jerked around, their guns in their hands. Both on their feet.

Rosita Vidal stood there in the doorway. It was easy to understand why men called her the Golden Rose. Her skin was the color of pale gold. Dark eyes flecked with gold. Reddish hair with golden highlights.

She wore a dress that matched the color of her eyes. It clung to her tall slender figure like a sheath. She looked into the black muzzles of the two guns, smiled into the faces of the two men. Then her laugh, so soft and throaty that it was barely audible, mocked them.

"What a delightful way to welcome a lady! Am I supposed to put up my hands? Scream? Faint, perhaps? I'm too lazy to put up my hands. I hate screaming. And I seldom faint. *Por Dios,* put those guns away. How are you, Shad?"

Don Pablo's face was bone white as he muttered something and shoved his gun back into a slot beneath the top of his desk. Shad grinned faintly and shoved his gun into the waistband of his charro pants. He took Rosita Vidal's outstretched hand. It was as cold as ice, trembling.

IT WAS said of Rosita Vidal that she was the most beautiful and the most dangerous woman in Sonora. Certainly her golden beauty was enough to make men lose their hearts and heads and kill one another. And there were times when she showed a calculating and unscrupulous shrewdness that equaled that of her father.

After that first shock of her entrance which Shad told himself had been timed to the split-second, when Shad and Don Pablo had shoved their guns out of sight and passed off the incident as best they could, the tension slacked off and Rosita handled the situation with cleverness.

Señora Vidal, whom everyone called the *doña,* showed up with a brown-frocked padre. Supper was a sumptuous and gay affair, for the Vidals lived after the fashion of rich Mexicans who enjoy good wine and food. Don Pablo drank far too much, but the hard glint in his black eyes never dimmed. He covertly watched Shad. Until Rosita whispered something in the ear of her father that made him scowl, then smile and shrug his straight shoulders. Shortly after supper Don Pablo bade Shad a formal good night and retired to his office.

Now was the time, Shad told himself, for Rosita to go on shift. The Golden Rose of San Luis was just as dangerous as Don Pablo.

Whoever had fetched word from Campo had told Don Pablo that Shad had killed Bob Huntoon at the latter's ranch and had stolen that money belt. Don Pablo had been so upset as to forget himself and try force where cunning would have put Shad in his power. Now it was Rosita's turn to try her luck.

"You will not be leaving us, my young friend," Don Pablo had said when he bade Shad good night. "I must insist that you stay."

Shad got the veiled threat behind the smile. He was no better than a prisoner here. Shad smelled danger everywhere.

It had ben a lie about Rosita taking a siesta. The Indian *mozo* who cleaned Shad's room let the information slip that the *señorita* had ridden away right after mass. She had not returned until late afternoon, shortly before she made her dramatic appearance in Don Pablo's private office.

Rosita suggested that Shad walk with her to a big old live-oak park half a mile from the ranch buildings. There was an old and bent and misshapen oak tree that formed a natural seat. Rosita called it the wishing tree. Its bent trunk made an ideal lovers' seat. She suggested that they go there to make a wish as the moon rose.

Shad agreed readily enough. He wanted to find out about Tom Wagner. By pretending jealousy he could ask about wild young Tom. He went to his room on some excuse. Rosita made no comment when he returned wearing his cardridge belt and holstered six-shooter.

"I'm a hunted man," he said simply, "I'd be foolish to go out without a gun."

"And nobody can accuse Shad Gibson," Rosita smiled, "of being foolish."

They walked under the trees together, holding hands. The hand holding was her idea. So that he could keep her from falling if she stumbled on the dark trail.

They sat together on the bent trunk of the wishing tree. Rosita sang in her low throaty voice. Shad's restless eyes watched the black shadows of the brush. Once or twice he was almost certain he heard some stealthy noise behind the brush.

Then the moon rose. It appeared from behind the ragged mountain skyline, round and yellow. Rosita's song ended. Perhaps it was really accidental or it might have been very clever acting. But in leaning back to look up at the moon she lost her balance. With a little gasp she grabbed at Shad's shirt. Both hands clutching him around the waist.

Shad felt her hand touch the money belt beneath his shirt. His arms were around her, holding her from falling over backward, and now Rosita gave a soft little cry. Her warm red lips found his mouth and clung.

Then the lovers' embrace was rudely, swiftly interrupted. There was a harsh, hoarse cry, and a man broke from the brushy cover. The voice, thick with whisky and rage, shouted a deadly warning.

"Damn you both! You yellow-eyed she-devil! You two-faced, tow-headed snake. Lyin' to my sister. Makin' love to my girl. I'm killin' you both!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Sometime Champ

When a fighter's legs get rubbery and there's a whisper in his chest, he's smart to settle down. He can talk about the old days to his son. But what if there's another, stronger whisper in him—a voice calling him Champ?

By Charles Marquis Warren

Author of "With Sword in Hand", "Appointment in October", etc.

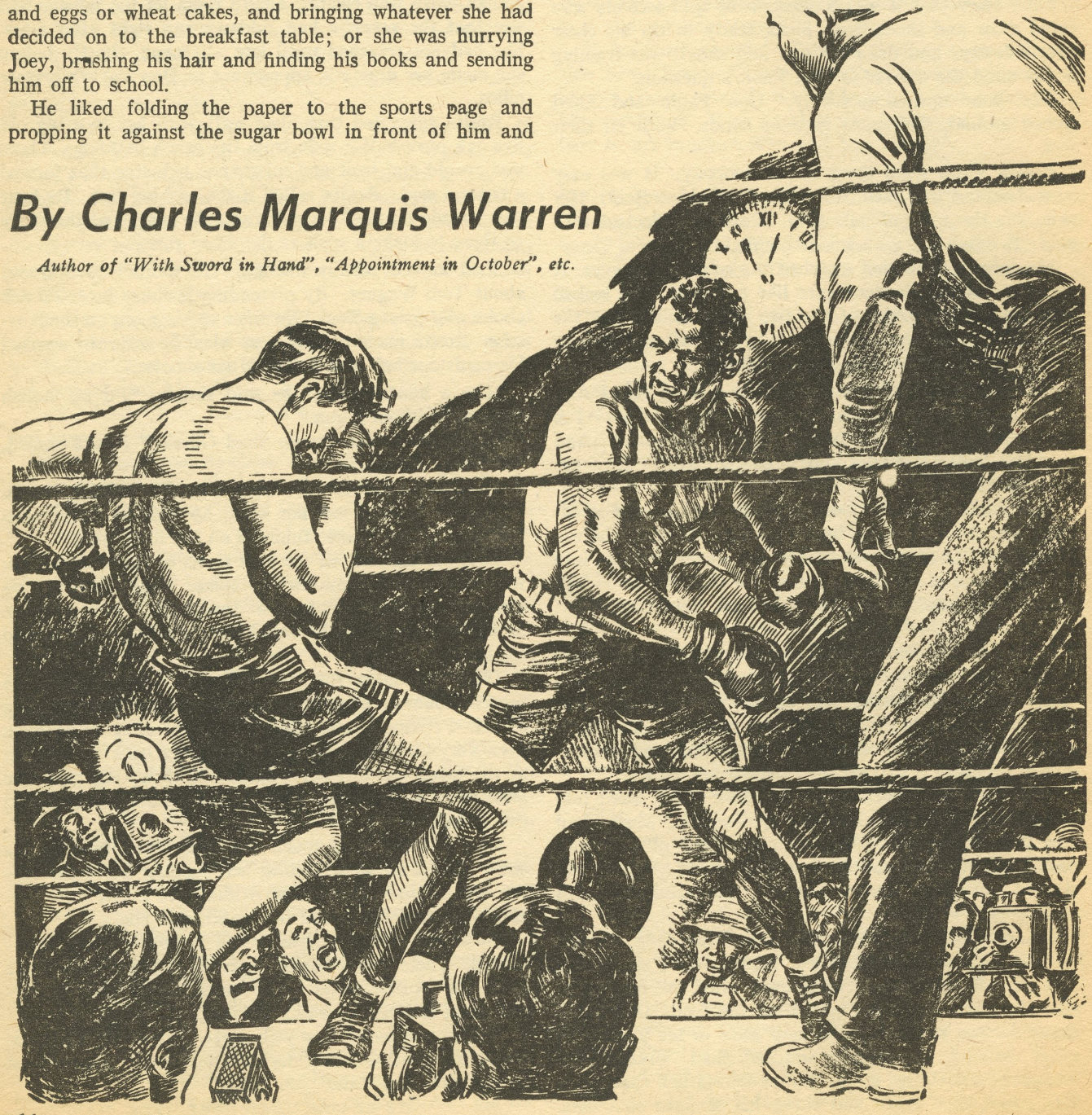
CHAPTER I

OLD MAN SHAGGY

HE LIKED reading the morning paper at breakfast. It wasn't a rudeness to Claire because she was always busy cooking his sausages or bacon and eggs or wheat cakes, and bringing whatever she had decided on to the breakfast table; or she was hurrying Joey, brushing his hair and finding his books and sending him off to school.

He liked folding the paper to the sports page and propping it against the sugar bowl in front of him and eating whatever Claire brought him and sipping her coffee while he scanned the college news and studied any column that dipped into the leather and the resin of prizefights.

There wasn't a morning went by when he wouldn't come across an item about one or more of his old friends. He'd read about Dempsey and Braddock and Mickey



Walker, and Canzoneri and Benny Leonard. Sometimes there would be a picture accompanying the column and that would delight him.

He'd spend minutes trying to discover whether they'd changed any more than he had. He would look for Jack's hairline and Jim's jowls and Tony's waist. It pleased him to find that they weren't beefing up noticeably; it made him feel as though he were holding up pretty well along with them.

And sometimes—more rarely now—there would be a line or two about himself. A reference maybe, or a comparison. They'd line up some newcomer and say he had a right like Shaggy Joe Merrill; or used his footwork the way Big Joe did. They even ran an occasional picture; one of the old ones of course, mostly the ones they took before he went against Maxie the Baer.

And when there was a mention or a picture it would make him feel all ticklish and pleasant inside. As though an old and admired hero took you by hand and spoke your name when you'd never known he knew it.

The entire day would be a success then; he wouldn't mind driving in the '36 runabout to the plant and going through the routine of being foreman at the Consolidated Salesbook Company. It would give him a lift that would carry him through the day, the way a healthy workout had used to do, and he'd supervise the setting up and linotyping and margin cutting and printing of salesbooks and brochures just as if he had an interest in what was going on.

He wouldn't even wince a little every time one of the office workers or the men in the plant grinned and said hello with an exaggerated enthusiasm; because on the days when he had ben mentioned in the sports page he liked to think that the office and the plant had read it. And he liked to think they were saying, "How's it go, Shaggy, ole champ, ole champ?" because the mention in the paper had recalled to them that he had nearly been a champ six years ago—and made them forget for the moment that they were duty-bound to be cheerful to President Trumbull's son-in-law.

BUT there was no mention this morning. It didn't discourage him. There would be the fun of opening the paper tomorrow. There was always the fun of opening it tomorrow. Two months ago there had been a mention. He was due most any morning now.

Joey came in and climbed all over him. His face was red and shining clean. His hair was combed as neatly at it ever would be. Claire could never do much with that double crown. The hairs stood up like stubble in a mowed wheat field.

"I gotta go, Champ. I'm late."

"Sure, you gotta." He ruffled the bristly double crown. He never had been able to shake off the tiny hurt which came over and a little to the left of his heart whenever Joey called him Champ.

Joey helped himself to a small sausage and slid down and slung his books over his shoulder, holding the knotted bookstrap in one hand and the rubber ball in the other.

"How are those fists coming, Joey?"

"Coming good. Squeezing the ball does like you said, Champ. I got the guys in school squeezing balls too."

Big Joe said, "Haven't had any fights lately?" softly.

"Me? With my old man a champ? Who's gonna hand me a fight?"

There it was again, above his heart, like a punch which barely connects.

"That's what I mean. None of the kids have—have they? Lately, I mean?"

"Told me you never were the champ, you mean?"

He didn't say anything. He nodded.

"They better not hand me their mouth." He looked at his father. He was seven years old and he talked like a freshman in junior high. That was Claire's brains and education, Big Joe thought. Big Joe hadn't contributed anything of himself to Joey, except a reputation that wasn't true for Joey to brag about.

He said quietly, "Don't you take notice of 'em, boy."

"But you were the champ, Champ."

"No, I wasn't."

"But almost."

"I had a shot at it."

"Sure. After you knocked off Maxie the Baer. And you would've been if you'd climbed in the ring with that sailor."

Big Joe didn't answer. She had come into the room and he looked at her. She was the most graceful thing he ever wanted to see. She was vibrant and warm and lovely. Even in her house smock she had him excited.

A long time ago he had looked up the name Claire in the dictionary. In the back of the book it gave you what the name meant. Hers had meant clear, bright, illustrious. Throw in something about her figure and he wouldn't want a better description.

Joey said, "Mummy, you're pretty," and was immediately hustled out the front door.

While he waited for her to come back he thought of how the years hadn't touched her any. She was nearly thirty. He was thirty-one. She was improving every day. And he was a foreman in her old man's plant and that was as high as he'd ever get. The old man didn't take many pains to conceal the fact that Big Joe wouldn't be getting the sixty a week he was getting if he could have earned a decent living for Claire any other way.

"What your Joe doesn't know about the manufacture of salesbooks would take me ten years to learn," the old man had said often enough to Claire.

"But he has ideas. Look at that composition book business you have now." Claire's eyes had a way of lighting brilliantly when she defended her Joe. "He belongs in the firm, not in the plant."

Hatcher Trumbull had plenty of solid meat on him for a man sixty-four. He had played on Yale's junior varsity football team in '01. He had plenty of pictures of the team strung about his office wall.

"In the firm? In the firm?" His laugh was good-naturedly hearty. "A prizefighter in the firm? He has it hard enough swinging the job he has now. He's a grand guy, Clairy, and I know it and everybody knows it. But in the firm?"

BIG Joe got up from the table and folded the paper back to the first page, leaving it neat for her.

She came back and he took hold of his wife and kissed her. Even this early in the morning her hair smelled like most women's only did at night.

"Hustle, darling," she said. "You'll be late. You're worse than Joey."

She smiled at him, running her fingers over his cheek.

"Shaggy," she said playfully.

He had no idea why they'd started calling him Shaggy. His hair was curly crisp and always cut neatly. Maybe it had been his bigness and his seemingly lumbering shuffle before he began his dance and started throwing that long right into the face of the other guy. The newspapers had liked Shaggy as a tag. He'd never minded it himself. Only when Claire used it.

"What's the matter?" he said.

She looked at him. When she held him off and looked at him like this, her lids half dropped, he could even forget what she wanted him to forget.

"You're itching again," she said. "I heard you talking to Joey. Don't talk that way to Joey, darling. It makes you feel as though you've denied him something. You haven't."

"Honey," he said, "I'm thirty-one. I feel ten years younger."

Her lids immediately opened. Her breath came a little quickly. She dropped her arms.

"Don't talk like that."

"It's the way I feel."

"You think you do, darling. They'd murder you. I don't care who they put in with you, he'd murder you. Please don't talk that way."

"Maybe I could give Joey something to talk about. He thinks you're beautiful. You are. He thinks I was a champ. I never was."

"That was my fault." Her voice was gentle.

"No. I was interrupted. I could take up where I left off. I left off pretty high."

He reached for her, but she backed away.

"And just one gate would bring us a hundred grand, honey. Remember when we thought of the things that hundred grand would do for us?" He grinned at her.

She didn't smile. She knew Big Joe and she was wise in the ways of Big Joe. He'd had these attacks off and on for the last four years. They were a little more serious now because they were coming more frequently.

She said, "It would be horrible. They don't laugh at Joey now. They tease him. But they'd laugh at him if you tried. They'd laugh. And he'd be ashamed. And I would."

She looked at him, seeing the hurt, the tight hurt which her words had brought. But it was the only way to help him. She let him have it as he would have let the other guy in the ring have it, hard and just one and final.

"You're getting awfully selfish, darling. Or is it vanity? You were awfully good once. Not the best, but better than most. This way you'll never know you hadn't a chance to be the best. And this way you won't be breaking your promise to me."

He got his hat and went out to the garage for the runabout. Sometimes when she had hurt him before over this same argument, he had failed to kiss her goodbye. But this was the first time, she thought, that he had never turned down at the end of the block to see if she was watching him go. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITH THE RUBBER LEGS

THE entire day went wrong for him. One of the presses went awry and a belt on the folding machine broke. It held up production. President Hatcher Trumbull came down to the plant floor from his office and had words with Big Joe.

He never seemed to recall that once, two years ago, Big Joe had figured out a way to utilize Consolidated's cutters and presses and type to turn out composition books, the kind kids use at school. That little twist in the business had brought in nearly a quarter of a million since then. Trumbull had laughed off Big Joe's preference for entering the firm rather than receiving the two-thousand-dollar reward the firm had offered.

"You just couldn't swing a position in the firm, Shaggy," the old man told him. "But this two thousand dollars will get you and Claire and Joey out of the apartment and into a nice house out in Yorkshire Row. They might look all alike but they're mighty cute houses, Shaggy."

Big Joe took the money, made the payment on the house and everybody was happy but him.

Now he stood on the floor and yelled above the hum of the presses to Hatcher Trumbull, "I don't know what's the matter but I've got the right men looking at the machines. And if you can get anyone else to fix 'em quicker, get 'em."

He walked away, leaving the president glowering at him.

Ten minutes before they shut off the telephone switchboard at five, a call came for him and it was Vince Beckit.

He said, "That's a shame, Vince. Sure. Sure. Yeah, I'll be down. Certainly I'll do it for you. But I can't do it for money. Not that kind of money. It wouldn't look right. I'll do it for nothing, boy."

And instead of driving the runabout straight home where Claire would be, he had dinner near the plant and drove to Armstead's Colosseum, where the Wednesday night fights were held, usually before seven or ten thousand screaming idiots. Tonight, Vince had said, there would be upwards of fifteen. And their combined disappointment and anger would be quite a bit more than he and Fred Armstead wanted to buck.

In the dressing room Vince shook hands and his thin lips grinned.

"You're doing me and Fred a big favor, pal. Many thanks."

Vince taped his hands and his ankles. He cut small strips of adhesive and stuck them to the edge of the dressing table against the time when Big Joe would come back into the room bleeding.

It was like old times. The smell of the liniment got in his eyes and nose and made them smart and suddenly the empty feeling went out of his stomach and he was so excited he had a hard time regulating his breath.

He lay on the table, stripped, and Vince Beckit went over his body with his hands. He kneaded and pounded. He did it quickly but he did it thoroughly. He was good with his hands, Vince was.

"You don't look a hell of a lot heavier after these years, Shaggy."

"Six more pounds than two centuries."

"That's about what I thought. You went best at one-ninety-five. You wouldn't have to take off but eleven-twelve pounds."

"Go to hell."

Vince grinned. "Sure, boy."

It was the old story. He and Vince had been at it for years. Six years, nearly. It was tough on Vince. But it was tough on Big Joe too. Big Joe got it from Vince

and he got it from Claire; he was whipsawed in the middle.

He looked at the clock on the bare plaster wall. Still over an hour. He'd come early because it required a certain amount of working on to knead even a layer of six years' rust off your body.

OUTSIDE, in the arena, he could hear them yelling at the youngsters and chopping blocks who worked in the prelims. The yelling was ferocious and exciting, as he remembered it. He turned over onto his stomach, face pressing against the wintergreen-smelling boards of the table, and let Vince go after his back and the calves of his legs.

"It's just ten," Vince muttered. "You can go ten easy. Your legs look fine. They look okay, Shaggy. Like they used to look."

"They got plenty of spring."

He wasn't very far off his training. He worked out here at the Colosseum on an average of twice a week, using the heavy and small bags, using the rope, and sparring with the marshmallow gloves with youngsters and stumblebums.

He felt scared and trembly and almost eager. He almost wished he were in the main dressing room which the prelim boys used together; this one was reserved for a guy who worked the main event; this one and the one just like it across the hall.

Barney Sauters would be in there. And Big Joe knew about Barney, who the newspapers said was a comer and as rugged as they came and as smart, for all his youth and inexperience. They had even compared him with Shaggy Joe Merrill when Merrill was at his peak six years ago.

Vince wound a towel around Big Joe's head.

"You're not sweating, Shaggy."

"This place is like a barn."

"No, it's hot. But you're not sweating."

"I'm tight inside."

"That's good. It's good you're tight inside."

"But not the way I used to be. That was good. This is just being scared. It's been a long time."

"Not too long. Now listen."

Vince's voice could be quiet and soothing. You could learn a lot about the guy who was going to be in there with you by listening to Vince. Barney Sauters carried his left too low. There was a steel coil inside of it, but he carried it too low.

"You feel him out, the first couple of rounds. Keep away from him. After the third try and spear him. Your legs might carry you ten, but after the eight they won't be worth much."

Big Joe looked at him.

"What is this? You sound like winning this fight's important."

Vince smiled. "Any fight's important, Shaggy."

"Listen. You know how I feel. I've told you before."

The eyes of Vince Beckit became shrewd. His thin lips were pleasantly curved in his thin face. He was offended. His eyes and smile said so.

"I'm not riding the gravy wagon, Shaggy. Honest. No more quick money. I'll get mine the hard way."

"You mean the legitimate way."

"Sure. I was drunk when I spoke to you those other times."

"Were you drunk when you carried that cannon?"

Vince flushed.

"That was my own business. That didn't have nothing to do with you."

Big Joe suddenly raised up on an elbow and let his hand go out and tap Vince's breast pocket.

"You're still carrying it."

Vince backed away.

"It isn't loaded." He took the automatic out and showed the empty clip triumphantly. "I haven't got around to pawning it yet is all." His face lighted. "And you can't put no blame on me for hiring out as a strong-arm for a guy or two. Not after what you did to me. I had to eat, didn't I?"

"There were other fighters."

"None like you."

A man stuck his head in the door.

"Get him out here, Vince. Semifinal's over."

IN A borrowed silk robe Big Joe walked slowly to the ring. Faces turned at him and stared and he didn't recognize any of them and this made him feel lonely.

He could hear the announcer's voice filling the big arena over the amplifier. The announcer was telling the crowd that Tommy Strickland had been taken with appendicitis, but he had a substitute who would surprise them. The crowd let go with a mighty roar of disapproval. It stamped its feet and whistled and jeered.

Big Joe was nearly to the ring when the announcer yelled the name of the substitute and the crowd got it.

There was a silence and Big Joe could feel the arena digesting the news and repeating the name Shaggy Joe Merrill over and over to itself in disbelief.

Then he was in the ring and shaking his hands briefly over his head and genuflecting beside the taut ropes and walking out to the center and meeting Barney Sauters. At that moment the roar of welcome broke loose and it lasted until the referee had to ask the announcer to request silence so the referee could give instructions.

Big Joe felt very pleasant inside. He couldn't remember a roar like that. It had been bigger and longer than the time he went in against Sharkey. He hoped he wouldn't let the crowd down.

The bell sounded as the lights went off in the arena and he went out and tied Barney up in knots in the first round. The crowd went mad. But they couldn't get a glimpse of Barney's easy breathing or his pale, killer eyes and the half smile which was always on his lips without his being aware he was smiling.

In the corner Vince used the towel and his wonderful hands.

"Sweet, Shaggy; sweet. But slow down."

During the second Barney became cagey and in the third his right began to work. It was a right that didn't miss twice in succession. It was a piston right. It landed and relanded on Big Joe's face and neck and about his body. And after the fourth he began to feel a little foolish.

In the corner Vince said softly, "Don't lose your head. Remembed you're better than this punk will ever be. Keep away from him. Take advantage of that low left. He ain't super-human. He can get tired too. He's already carrying it down to his knees."

But Big Joe seemed to run into it in no matter what direction he stepped. The crowd began to yell for the kill and Big Joe thought he'd been a fool to do this and ruin whatever nice thoughts were still thought about him.

He lashed tiredly and blindly with his famous right. It glanced the little half-moon scar-tissues between Barney's eyebrows. Barney smiled unconsciously at that famous right. That delayed roundhouse right. And he let go with a hundred hooks and jabs into Big Joe's face and stood over Big Joe while the referee tried to pull him away so that he could start counting.

The bell sounded in Big Joe's ears. It sounded loud because it was on a table below the ring. And Big Joe's ear was on the canvas and closer to the bell than if he had been standing up.

Vince Beckit wiped the blood from his nose and the corners of his lips.

"You can still take him, Shaggy. Remember against that Carnera? Remember against that Eyetalian Man Mountain? You were out on your feet in the fifteenth when you found him."

"I . . . was . . . in condition."

BARNEY SAUTERS made a show of it by dancing over to meet Big Joe before he got started out of his corner. The crowd was stamping its feet and rhythymically chanting, "Now. . . Now . . . *Now!*"

For a moment sheer paralysis gripped his head and chest and he stood stock still, the horror taking a hold on him. He had felt it. Above and to the left of his heart. That gentle tap of warning, that soft whisper of pain. It breathed upon the inside of his chest as it did when Joey called him Champ. Only this was a hurt, a dainty, soft hurt.

Barney Sauters caught him in the mouth with a crossed right; he caught him on the temple with that ponderous left which he'd had time to lift from his knees.

Barney gave up boxing, tossing it away from him, and stood there and slugged.

The darkness went away from Big Joe's eyes. He leaned against Barney, his arms pinning the other's wrists. He thought, Give me a second, Barney, give me a second. If you're going to slug you're on my home grounds and I can do that better than you can.

The referee walked through the clinch and Barney grinned pleasantly and stroked Big Joe's jaw with one that came up from the canvas and Big Joe went down and everybody in the arena knew he wouldn't get up.

Everybody but Big Joe.

He took his full count and got up because it was the thing to do and because he'd done it before in the years that were gone, and because it always paid for itself in the end if you fought on your feet like a man and didn't require anything and didn't ask for anything.

For a moment he looked into the pale eyes opposite him and felt dread. If Barney dropped back to boxing again it would be over in a few minutes. Big Joe's legs were hot and wet and his knee caps shook violently. They weren't good for anything now but stretching out in a warm bath and then between cool sheets.

So he walked forward before Barney could overcome his inexperience and resort to the soundness of boxing and use Big Joe's legs instead of his own.

Big Joe walked into him and speared him. It was perhaps the third real punch he had thrown. It was the famous right. That split second delay while he feinted with his left and then brought up the roundhouse. Only the timing was rusty with six years' inactivity and it took a good deal more than a split second to bring it up.

But it nailed Barney against the ropes and when the ropes bounced him back onto the canvas he didn't get up until his trainers came in to assist him.

Big Joe stood still, his head lowered as if to bear the brunt of the roar of surprised delight which came down upon him from all sides.

When Vince came out and threw his arms around him, Big Joe said, "I got to sit down, Vince. I got to sit down . . ."

HE WAS dressed and sitting on the trainer's table and had declined Vince's offered cigarettes. He felt a little better but he couldn't do much about lifting his legs in a regular walk.

"That's right," Vince said. "Don't smoke. It's best to begin right away getting off the things that don't help you any."

Big Joe looked up at him wearily.

"Never mind that kind of talk. I've told you how it is with me. This was just to do you a favor tonight."

"But look at the favor you did yourself! Just think about it, Shaggy. Think what the morning papers are going to say. Shaggy Joe Merrill's come back and how."

"I'm going home now, Vince. That's how it is."

"But Shaggy—"

Vince looked helpless. He tried to smile in an offhand manner. "Sure, if you want. But take your cut, boy. Four hundred bucks ain't barley."

"I don't want it. Keep it. It'll help make up for some of the dough you think I cut you out of. I don't need it. I got a job."

"Sixty a week. Is that a job?"

"It's what I got."

"Come on down to Ben's and have a beer. A beer or two won't hurt you this early in training. Later on, no beer."

Big Joe hoisted himself slowly to his feet.

"Look, Vince." His voice was tired with the weight of his fatigue. "I promised Claire. Nobody knows that better than you. Maybe I was good in there tonight. Maybe I could come back. But maybe it was just a lucky punch. Maybe Barney had me finished. Get yourself another guy. I'm no longer in this racket."

"I tried six dozen since you quit me. You know that. I even played hunches and took on guys named Joe and tried calling 'em Shaggy. You know how it was. I lost everything I saved while you and me worked together. I couldn't get none of 'em past the prelims."

"Goodnight, Vince."

He went to the door. There wouldn't be any photographers or sports writers lingering this late. They'd be gone half an hour or so, making the bulldog edition with what they'd seen tonight.

They'd crowded the dressing room immediately after the fight. They'd been swell. They wanted to know if this was to be a comeback. They were all for it after the flash they'd seen tonight. It would pep up the racket. There wasn't a contender within shooting distance that was worth two columns in a semi-monthly.

But he hadn't said anything. Just smiled with his tiredness showing in his smile. That fatigue ought to have convinced them.

He opened the door. The hall was empty and dark except for the solitary electric bulb which gave a feeble yellow point of light.

Vince Beckit's voice stopped him. It was desperate and quiet.

"Shaggy."

He turned around.

Vince's eyes were helpless with the embarrassment which abject appeal can bring to a man.

He said in a strange, hoarse voice, "Not even if I'm strictly on . . . the level? Just you and me, Shaggy? Like old times? We could lick the world again . . ."

"Not even, Vince." It was personal punishment to throw Vince down like this. He could see Vince's eyes and mouth and they were like the old Vince and you should never sock a man when he's fallen into a clinch. "I'm sorry, Vince. But I promised."

He walked slowly into the coolness of the night air.

THE note was anchored to the small table in the hall with one of Joey's toy lead soldiers. He thought bitterly that the toy was about the neatest trick she could have pulled. It didn't occur to him that it might have been the handiest weight and the nearest article when she had written the note.

It said in her firm backhand:

Vince called here first, darling. I hoped you'd turn him down and I thought perhaps you might. We waited dinner until nine. Joey and I listened to you on the radio until the seventh. We couldn't either of us bear it any longer. Good luck, darling, and I hope you can stand it. We couldn't.

He moved aimlessly about the house, turning on all the lights and leaving them on. It was very empty. No matter what room he stood in he could hear the kitchen sink dripping.

Anger obliterated the first sense of shock and loneliness. They'd turned it off in the seventh. In the eighth he proved he wasn't a punk. Maybe Joey had wanted to keep listening, but Claire had turned it off.

She'd run the first time it even looked as though he might break his promise. Home to Hatcher Trumbull. And that wouldn't make the old man mad. The only thing the old man had ever liked about Big Joe was Joey.

He hadn't broken any promise. He'd laid down the law to Vince, punished himself by punishing old Vince; refused to consider breaking his promise to Claire. And she'd run out without facing him. Home to the old man. She'd got in a nice, telling wallop after the bell had rung.

He went around turning off the lights.

. . . In Ben's Tavern he saw Vince Beckit sitting with two girls. One of them was Vince's girl, Margie McKean. And he could see how Vince would be desperate to do anything that had a money lining. Margie McKean was blond and soft and very little. She had a bright smile which didn't look hard until you were within kissing distance.

He sat down at the table and said, "A beer, Vince. And I'll take the four hundred bucks. I need it. I'm out of a job."

Vince was fumbling all over himself to get the money out and slide it across the table to Big Joe. Vince was so pleased he couldn't stop grinning foolishly, like a kid whose stolen bike has been found.

"When you want to start conditioning, Shaggy? When you want to get started, Champ?"

"You think I better wait until tomorrow?"

Vince whooped. He called the waiter and told him to set up beers.

"Drink 'em now, Shaggy. You won't see no more beer close to your mouth till they're asking you to endorse sweaters, boxing gloves and punching bags."

Big Joe nodded, feeling the tight anger inside him as if it were a hot, bouncing ball. He turned his attention to the girl whom Vince had introduced as Val. He looked at the quietness of her, at the dark hair and the generous lips and the level brown eyes. He hadn't thought a girl like this one would have much to do with a guy like Vince.

CHAPTER III

GUNNER, HERE I COME

THE newspapers showed the sparseness of legitimate contenders in the way they played up the story of Shaggy Joe Merrill's comeback. Here was color and human interest and appeal. It was as good as Jim Braddock's climb from the breadlines.

They didn't have to invent any angles because angles were there for the printing. Big Joe had come out of retirement to dislodge the champion. The people were tired of the fledgling opposition the promoters were forced to dig up for the Gunner. It was something when a man had to come out of the past and offer his services.

One sports columnist wrote:

A physical specimen such as Shaggy Joe Merrill doesn't lose his form in six years. Ask Barney Sauters about that. And question a few of Shaggy's sparmates at Pen Mar. Those gentlemen are learning quite conclusively at the hands of one Joe the Shaggy that thirty-one is not an age of decrepitude, and that form and timing and punch aren't irrecoverable if the heart and the will and the basic skill are there.

And this made many people in many states very sentimental and extremely happy.

The fact that the reporters wisely chose to make no mention of a man's legs at the age of thirty-one was not a source of vital concern to the many happy people. Unless the depressing aspects are continually accentuated, it is fun to be deliberately oblivious and base logic on wishful thinking.

Big Joe and Vince Beckit trained at the old place in Pen Mar. Big Joe remembered it fondly. You went through Maryland, up past Belair, up past Mt. Airy, until you came to the purple smoke of the Blue Ridge Mountains and stopped at Pen Mar, which was half in Pennsylvania and half in Maryland.

The air was clear and cold and just thin enough here. The lake could freeze you and make the roadwork a brisk pleasure.

"I don't want to take the bungalow," Big Joe told Vince firmly. "I don't like memories. I don't like to think when I'm training. We'll live at the hotel."

Vince said, "I was over there this morning and it's rented anyhow," and looked at Big Joe queerly. He hoped the big man wasn't going to get ants in his head. It was tough to train a guy with ants in his head.

So they stayed at the hotel and walked out to the spot in the woods where they put up the training ring. And the sparmates came with their pale eyes and flat noses and empty, friendly grins and packhorse muscles. They said sure they'd be willing to work on the cuff until the

Gunner and Big Joe signed the contract, but they said they had to eat and the hotel wouldn't present them with free rooms merely because Big Joe's training camp was drawing a bustling business for it.

That sent Big Joe to the telegraph office to wire for what savings he'd managed to amass at sixty bucks a week. He didn't have to send any money to Claire; Hatcher Trumbull would have taken a peculiar delight in returning any money by the following mail.

THE third week Vince's girl, Margie McKean, came up and Val Winston came with her. They took a room at the hotel. Big Joe had an idea that Margie had run out of funds because several times he overheard Vince trying to borrow sawbucks from the reporters and photographers who swarmed about Pen Mar.

The customers who paid to watch Big Joe train barely took care of the bills at the hotel, so there wasn't any overflow of money and Margie became petulant and threatened to leave and Vince's face grew hard and once when Big Joe came into the room he found Vince handling the automatic thoughtfully.

"Put that away, Vince. You thinking of holding up the joint?"

Vince wasn't flustered. His lips were very thin.

"It's a thought. But I wasn't thinking of it."

"Put it away. You could pawn it for a sawbuck."

Vince put the gun in the dresser drawer. "Where?" he said. "Where's a pawnshop in this dump?"

"What were you thinking of doing with that gun?"

Vince went to the door. He said over his shoulder: "I got the idea Margie wouldn't walk out on me so quick if she wasn't able to walk.

"You damn fool."

"Sure I am. I'm two damn fools."

He closed the door and went out.

But Margie didn't run. Val talked to her. Val, with her level brown eyes and her generous lips and her quiet manner. She talked to Margie in the little bar off the lobby as she and Margie and Vince drank beer and Big Joe drank orangeade.

Val pointed out that Vince was a pretty decent guy and if the two of them had any idea of getting married it wouldn't be so long before the Gunner decided to sign the papers and there'd be some money showing all around.

Margie pouted her pretty lips and then smiled and looked at Vince and patted the hand which held his beer glass.

"You big lug," she said affectionately, "you're not worth it. But I could do worse."

Vince's relief showed in his grin. It was the first time in days he hadn't looked tired and harried and desperate with a flat, grim desperation.

"We'll be in the dough soon, honey," he said. He grinned all over. "The big dough. You see the way Shaggy went in there today?"

Val's solemn eyes found Big Joe's and she said quietly, "Let's leave them alone, Joe. We could take a short walk."

He walked a lot during the evenings with Val. She soothed him without knowing she did so. She talked about him and his past records, his achievements and his ambitions and his disappointments. She took the sting out of the empty mailbox that was waiting for him each morning when he went to see if there was a letter from Claire.

Val never asked him about Claire. He spoke of Joey. He didn't have much to say about Claire. Once he walked down to the bungalow, which was a mile away from the hotel, and took a look at it. He remembered the six weeks he and Claire had spent there when he was training for a shot at the Sailor and the championship.

It was here in the bungalow that he and Claire had stayed up all that night reaching the decision that had made him throw up the shot at the championship and the fight racket all together.

HE REMEMBERED how she had sat on the arm of his chair and held his face in between her small hands and told him that she loved him more than she would ever love anything else. He remembered seeing the logic in her argument.

If you won the championship you either quit and went into retirement, which was slapping a lot of guys who had worked up with you in the face, or you kept on fighting, risking the title whenever the public thought it had found a potentially new champion.

After a while the little wheels in your head became loose from the pounding and rattled around like the insides of a broken alarm clock. It wasn't the picture of a guy most women wanted their husbands to be.

So he promised her to quit just as the dawn broke up the mountain over the grey lake, and she'd kissed him and said very softly that she was glad because they were going to have a baby and it would be nice to have the baby's father a sound man with all the little wheels in his head working as they ought to work.

So he did not mention to her that he had been down in Baltimore the previous day, not as he had said, for extra equipment, but to see old Doctor Lewis. The pain over his heart had become sharper and it scared him a bit when he rested and it didn't go away.

"Well, there it is," Doc Lewis had said bluntly after the examination. "It's not bad yet. It might never be. But maybe you'll pound around in the ring and guys will keep taking punches at it, and then your pump might start to leak. And then there won't be any more exercise, let alone fighting. Maybe there won't be any more you."

But he had never told Claire. There was no use in seeing how much he could worry her.

Now, watching the bungalow, it all came back. And it did him no good. He did not feel like going inside. He turned around and walked back to the camp for the afternoon session.

He was feeling pretty good. His muscles were flat and hard and springly. His wind was good. His legs could be worse, and if he could develop his old punch he wouldn't have to count on his legs. In all the weeks of training he had not felt the whisper that scratched in his chest. It was almost as if he had suffocated the pain with the sheer health of his body.

There were more than the usual number of customers in the camp. There were a lot of reporters and photographers he hadn't seen before. They came rushing up to him, taking pictures and pressing him for a statement as to what he would do now.

"What do you mean?" he asked. This was a lot more attention and interest than usually accompanied the fourth week of training. Galento didn't get this much. "I'm going to lick the Gunner and I haven't thought any farther ahead than that," he told them.

Then he made out what they were talking about.

Somebody hollered, "Now that he won't fight you, what you gonna do, Shaggy?"

"Won't fight me?"

Vince Beckit pushed his way through the crowd and said, "Let him alone, guys. He hasn't heard. He's been walkin'."

In the privacy of the small convertible dressing room, Vince told him that the champion had decided not to fight him.

"It's ballyhoo," Vince said. His face was gray and drawn. His thin lips kept twitching with anger and nervous chagrin. "The Gunner wants to build the gate. It's okay to get a million-dollar gate. The people will howl for this fight. But it means we got to wait four or five months. And we haven't got the dough to wait four or five weeks."

Big Joe didn't say anything.

"The Gunner uses the beef that you ain't sparred with anybody but punks. He says you ain't earned a shot at the title. He says you got to prove it to him and his manager as well as the people that you're in a class to fight for the crown."

Vince got up and paced back and forth with short jerky steps. His face had turned a little white. He was muttering to himself.

Big Joe said, "We can build me up, Vince. We can barnstorm a couple of months. Book me some bums at first, then book me some comers. At the end I'll take on a couple of has-beens and a couple of comers. It'll do me some good. These punks I been swinging with don't work me out much."

Vince swung around. His hot eyes lighted.

"You mean it, Shaggy? You honest to God mean it?"

"Sure. Do me good."

But Big Joe was wondering how the next two months of barnstorming were going to effect the whisper that he no longer felt in his chest. He thought he'd stroll over to the hotel and talk about simple things to Val.

He wondered if he was falling in love with Val.

CHAPTER IV

KEROSENE CIRCUIT

THE newspapers proved Vince right. They clamored for the fight and daily flayed the dusky hide of the Gunner and his manager for ignoring a challenger who seemed a real threat to the crown. But the Gunner took no notice and proceeded to batter the Godoys and the Conns and the McCoys with his sleepyhead, catlike indifference.

"But it's good for the gate when he does sign," Vince Beckit told Big Joe. They were in St. Louis and Vince was taping Big Joe's hands before he went in to meet Ted Burke. "The public's yelling like murder. Every time the Gunner knocks off one of these third-rate selections it makes you look a hundred percent better. When we get it, it'll be a million dollar gate."

Big Joe said, "Sure, Vince," and nothing else.

He was wondering how far he'd go against this Burke. Ted was tough. He was no bum. He was a has-been who had just taken the first step down from the crest. He'd gone the limit with the Gunner a year ago, and the decision had been booed.

So Ted Burke would furnish the test. After tonight Big Joe would know how he stood.

He felt fine. Sometimes he had difficulty recovering his wind after a long bout, but it wasn't slowing him down in any way that he could see.

He'd fought six times in the last ten weeks. That was too much fighting for a guy to do unless he was making a swing around the kerosene circuit, fighting the bums and the rubes for sucker money; capitalizing on his name.

Big Joe had gone surprisingly well. He hadn't taken on the stumblebums. He'd met guys like Jimmy Crusek and Art Simms and Killer Koy and the big youngster from California, Billy Baxter. The crowds came because Shaggy Joe Merrill was fighting for what the sports columns tagged a martyred cause, and because he was doing all right and bearing out all the papers' expectations.

Not one of the guys in the ring with him had lasted longer than seven heats. And each fight had been won by a knockout. It got so that Big Joe would come into his corner, breathing like a runaway horse, receive the bottle and liniment and towel and rubbing from Vince, and wait for Vince to say in his soft shrewd voice, "This is it, Shaggy; give it to him in this one."

And in six fights Shaggy had not failed to deliver in the round which Vince had called.

But each fight was a risk. Let something go wrong, let Big Joe's legs give out under him for a moment, let him stop a horseshoe punch with his chin, let him lose one even by a decision and there'd be nothing but smoke left. The bright picture of the fight with the champion would explode. The Gunner wouldn't fight a has-been who lost a decision on the comeback road.

"Take the towel off my head, Vince," Big Joe said.

"Let it stay on."

"I'm hot. I'll keep my sweat." He unwound the towel and dropped it to the floor.

Vince snatched it up. His face was white and sharp.

"Leave it on! What you think you're doing?"

Vince threw the towel as hard as he could at Big Joe's head. It hit Big Joe's face, wrapping itself around his head, and then slipped to the floor.

Big Joe swung his legs from the table and sat up. He looked at Vince. Vince was breathing quickly. His face was drawn and thin.

"What's the matter, Vince?" Big Joe asked quietly.

VINCE seemed to cave in on himself. His shoulders slumped and he let his hands drop. He looked down at the floor. There was red color creeping into his neck.

"I'm sorry, Shaggy. God knows I got no call to treat you like that. I'm nervous about this go with Burke, is all."

"That's not what's bothering you."

Vince didn't look up. "Sure. What else, Shaggy?"

"Margie."

Vince looked up. His eyes had a bright glitter in them.

"Don't go saying anything about Margie. She don't bother you."

"Yes she does, Vince."

Vince took a step forward. His eyes were ugly with jealousy and anger.

"You mean she's been playing up to you? If she done any of that I'll—"

"I don't mean it that way. But look, Vince. Look at it from my way. The gates at our fights haven't been too bad. What with paying expenses and paying off the debts at the training camp, there hasn't been much left over.

"But there's been a little. We ought to have got along. But we haven't. You been borrowing from me and from the trainers and from every newspaper guy you could get your hands on. But even what you borrowed couldn't buy that Buick Special job that Margie drives around in. It couldn't buy a piece of that sable coat she sports at night. It couldn't pay the rent in the classy apartment hotels that she stays in each time we move to another city."

Vince stood still. He was breathing loudly through his nose. It sounded like the panting of an engine getting up steam. His eyes were brighter than Big Joe had ever seen them. He stared at Big Joe. It wasn't a nice stare to see.

Big Joe said gently, "Margie was the reason you lost all the dough you made when you and me worked together the last time, wasn't she, Vince?"

Vince's answer was a shout. A high, thin shout.

"Val's been squawking to you! She's been hollering her mouth off to you. If you been listening to that lousy little—"

"Wait a minute, Vince." When Big Joe's tone was silky soft it was time to lay off whatever you were talking about and Vince knew it. Vince shut up. But the yellow points in his eyes were bright.

Big Joe said softly, "Val hasn't been talking to me except to say Margie is a fine kid who wants a lot out of life and deserves it because she didn't get much when she was young."

Vince wet his lips.

"That's right, Shaggy," he said. "Val's a good kid too."

"I believe that what you're worrying about is that another guy is buying those luxuries for Margie. Isn't that it, Vince?"

Vince swallowed. He looked at the floor. His answer came so softly Big Joe could hardly hear it.

"Maybe that's it, Shaggy."

Artie Burns, the trainer in Big Joe's corner along with Vince, opened the door and put his head through.

"Okay, Shaggy. You're on."

Big Joe said gently, "Come on, Vince. We'll get this Burke and then the Gunner will have to look at us. There'll be plenty of dough. Come on and call the round for me. I can dump Ted whenever you say. He won't be so tough."

BUT Burke was the toughest yet. In the fourth he caught Big Joe with a looping right to the chin and sent him crawling to the canvas. The referee had got to five before Big Joe could make out that the feet in front of his eyes belonged to the referee and not to himself.

He climbed up and rocked a little against Burke and Burke backed away and delivered another one to the same spot. Big Joe went over backward.

But his chin was one of Big Joe's assets and he climbed to his feet again and wobbled into a clinch and clung there until the referee separated them and by that time the bell had rung.

In the corner Vince worked quickly over him, slapping his face and passing the small bottle under his nose. Artie Burns fanned him and crooned his conception of a little encouraging song.

"Now?" Big Joe gasped to Vince. "You want it now, Vince?" His breath was very short. Shorter than it should have been at the end of the fourth. There was a scratching inside his chest. It seemed to hurt and then burn, hurt then burn, hurt burn.

He tried to grin at Vince. In his condition it was ridiculous to even suggest knocking Burke down. He looked across at the granite-muscled man who glistened in his corner. Burke breathed easily. He looked fine. He'd stayed the limit with the Gunner a year ago.

"Take it easy," Vince said in his ear. "You're all right, Shaggy boy. You'll get him. You breathing better now?"

"Yeah. Better . . . now."

The bell rang.

"Take it easy," Vince cautioned as Big Joe moved out.

Burke came fast. His gloves were everywhere Big Joe looked. And after a minute and a half one of them was right between Big Joe's eyes when he looked.

He stayed on one knee, watching the referee's fingers indicate the count, and watching the faces around the rim of the ring. Some of them looked sorry. It occurred to him that he might have a lot of friends he never knew and would never meet. He watched Vince and Artie. Vince was frowning. Artie seemed to be screaming and pleading at the same time.

Then he got up and the referee wiped the resin from his gloves. He backed away from Burke. He saw something that surprised him. Burke was bleeding at the mouth and about the eyes. Burke hadn't done that to himself. It came to Big Joe that he must have got in a few himself. It tickled him. He felt pleased and proud and for a moment the fire in his chest and the effort to breathe didn't seem too terrific.

He chopped at Burke's close face. He made Burke waste a left and it whistled past his ear. He sank one into Burke's stomach an inch above the navel and was surprised to see his glove almost buried in flesh. That belly wasn't granite. He guessed that was why Burke was taking the step down from the crest.

In the corner Artie Burns crooned over him and sponged

his face and sprinkled some astringent in the cut over his right eyebrow.

"Shaggy boy, Shaggy boy," he crooned. "You're my Shaggy boy an' you got good legs an' you're gonna get 'im." Artie was a humpty-dumpty with an ugly red face and Big Joe thought he was a swell gent whose wheels were rattling around in his head very pleasantly.

And then Vince was saying quite clearly in his ear, "This is it, Shaggy boy. Give it to him in this one. He's yours."

It perked him up. It startled him. He'd never thought he would hear Vince ask for a knockdown in this fight.

Burke let him have three quick ones to the face and Big Joe thought: Ted, it's just you and me and I'm as good as you are.

He brought his roundhouse up and it connected. He hadn't had enough room to get the full power, or enough time, but it was better and more effective from a short distance now than it had been ten weeks ago.

Burke seemed to fade from his line of vision and he didn't see him again until he bent his head and looked down. He kept standing there while the referee raised his arm and the crowd went insane.

CHAPTER V

BATTLE NERVES

THE gunner and Shaggy Joe Merrill signed the papers in Chicago. It was Major Frank Gibbs' gesture to Chicago after he had announced that he was putting on the fight in his own lovely stadium out Bronx way in New York.

Big Joe got off the train in Union Station at Baltimore. He made Val get off with him.

"Just for a few minutes," he said. He was grinning. "There's another train to New York in an hour and we can catch that. I've got a surprise for you."

At the end of the platform Joey was standing. He came dashing up to Big Joe. His hair had been neatly combed, except for the double crown. He was mighty glad to see Big Joe.

"The surprise," Big Joe announced proudly to Val.

Val smiled. "He's something," she said quietly. She shook hands with Joey.

"I sent a telegram yesterday to Claire at her father's," Big Joe explained. "I asked to see Joey." He ruffled Joey's hair. "Did your mother bring you down?"

"Mummy's waiting for me outside the station," Joey said."

Big Joe flushed. Val looked embarrassed. Then she said gently, "Joey and I will wait here if you want to go out and—"

"No. But thanks. How you been, Joey?"

"I been fine, Champ. What've you been doing?"

And that hurt. Claire had not only run off with Joey but she hadn't permitted the kid to learn what Big Joe had been doing.

"I been doing all right, Joey. You better run now. I only asked for a couple of minutes."

"I don't want to run. I don't see you so much now."

"You got to go, Joey. I'll see you in two weeks. I'll have a lot to tell you. And then you can tell the kids at school a couple of things."

When Joey was gone Val said quietly, "You're not very bright, Joe. You're the nicest guy I'll ever know, but you're not very bright."

Big Joe said, "The way it goes," and said nothing else. But he looked at Val. She was smiling at him. She put her hand through his arm and they walked back to the train.

At Trenton he summoned the nerve to ask her what she had meant.

She gave him her serious, nice smile again.

"You've got quite a family, Joe. They love you."

"I hope Joey does. I've never given him much reason to."

"You hope Claire does too."

"Did I say that?"

"You don't have to."

He put his hand on hers. It was the first time he had ever touched her. Her hand was cool. It didn't return his pressure.

"Val," he said. "Val?"

"Don't say it," she said softly.

"Don't say what?"

"What you were going to say. You don't mean it. You think you do. And there isn't any use."

"Val, don't you feel anything for me?"

She withdrew her hand. She smiled at him. "Didn't I ever tell you, Joe?"

"Tell me what?"

"I'm married. Quite happily married, Joe."

He got up. He could feel in his throat how thick his voice sounded. He couldn't hear it himself. His head was buzzing.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Forget I've been around, will you?"

"I will." She kept smiling at him.

He walked down the aisle, swaying a bit with the motion of the train. He didn't look back. He went into the clubcar, head down, to avoid autograph seekers.

He didn't see Val put aside her smile, gently, the way a small thing must be treated when it has served faithfully and well, and turn her face to the window and watch the New Jersey countryside with eyes widened. Keeping your eyes wide is a very good way to keep them dry.

THREE days before the fight Big Joe left the West Side Gymnasium where he had been working out all morning and without saying anything to anybody he went to Pennsylvania Station and bought himself a ticket and got on a southbound train. The next words he said were to a cab driver in Baltimore when he gave Doc Lewis's address.

Doc Lewis looked at Big Joe over his spectacles and said, "I been expecting you. You gonna die?"

"I don't know, doc. This morning, pounding that bag, I felt like it."

"I been reading about you. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. Not till I went with flowers. Come on in and let's have a look."

After the examination Doc Lewis waited until Big Joe had put on his clothes.

"Well, Shaggy, it's worse. But you knew that. It's been trying to tell you itself."

"Will it be all right for this last one, doc?"

Doc Lewis took off his spectacles. "You're a damned fool, Shaggy."

"I've got a thing to do, doc."

"Sure you have. Stay healthy. And alive."

"Will it hold up?"

"No."

Big Joe picked up his hat, "Thanks, doc. It's what I wanted to know."

"You gonna try it anyhow?"

"You know that, doc?"

Doc Lewis swore. "I only know you're a damned fool. Where you going now?"

"Back to New York. There's a guy there I know of, a doctor. He's needled some of the boys when their pumps kicked up. He can fix me well enough to pass the Commission's doctor."

"Then the guy isn't a doctor. He's a quack."

"He's what I need just now."

"I'll report him. I'll report you too."

"No you won't, doc. You know Claire too well."

"That's why I'll report you."

"And you know Joey."

Doc Lewis swore again. He put on his spectacles. "You don't need to go to the quack, Shaggy. I'm as good a quack as you'll find in New York."

"You mean you'd do it for me, doc? I wouldn't ask you to do anything that would get you in trouble."

"You don't need to be needled. I'm fixing you up right now. This is how. You got three days. You rest and stay off your feet three days and you'll pass the examination. It's what you ought to do for six months. When you enter the ring you'll be better than you are now. But I'm not thinking about what would happen if you caught a solid punch square over that pump."

"Thanks, doc."

Big Joe went out and climbed back into the cab. The driver said, "I been thinking. Ain't you Shaggy Joe Merrill?"

"You guessed it."

"Mr. Merrill, I got ten bucks on you against that Gunner. The odds is eight to five.

"You'll win yourself sixteen bucks."

"How you feelin', Mr. Merrill?"

"I never felt better."

IT WAS suffocating in the dressing room. He sat on the edge of the rubbing table and put on his trunks and shoes and watched Artie Burns cut strips of adhesive with a razor blade. From the stadium above him he could hear the roar of the capacity crowd rise and die as the boys in the semifinal slugged it out up there in the ring which was where second base would be tomorrow.

Big Joe had the jitters as he had never had before and the sporadic yelling only served to intensify the jumping nerves inside his arms and legs and body.

"Why doesn't he show up?" he demanded of Artie. "We're due up there any minute. What the hell does Vince think this is?"

Artie said gently, "Easy, Shaggy boy. Don't you worry yourself none. Evrything's gonna be fine. Be fine."

Big Joe swore. He hadn't seen Vince since the weighing in this afternoon. And then just for a minute while the pictures were taken. Vince had dashed off after a hurried admonition to Big Joe to sleep till seven o'clock and eat the light supper that the hotel chef had prepared for him.

He hadn't mentioned when he would see Big Joe. He'd been in a terrific rush. And Big Joe knew it was because Margie McKean was having a fling with that Harvard boy whose old man owned all the leather goods business east of the Rocky Mountains.

Big Joe got off the table, stretched in agitation, and held out his hands to Artie.

"Tape 'em. I can't wait for that louse all night. Bandage 'em good. I don't want 'em broken when I hit that Gunner's head."

Artie went about the task seriously. When he finished he said softly, "Lay down, Champ. You gotta while yet. Lay down an' let ol' Artie smooth them muscles."

Artie worked gently, loosening the muscles. Big Joe raised his arm and crooked it over his face to shield his eyes from the light. He tried to relax. It didn't work.

He kept remembering the times during the last four years when Vince Beckit had come to him with his propositions. Vince, who had flopped as a manager and even as a handler after Big Joe had left him.

"Come on, Shaggy," Vince would beg drunkenly. "Show me you got a brain instead of paste behind your eyes. I could bill you against these palookas and there's lots of suckers would bet heavy dough on your reputation and that right of yours. They don't think you're through, not against palookas. Then you could fold. Make it look good, but fold. We'd collect. You could even lay out some bets on the palooka yourself. That's better than sixty a week out at your father-in-law's joint, isn't it?"

HE DIDN'T know why he was remembering that stuff now. He was on edge, he guessed. He shoved Artie sharply away with his knees.

"Quit pawing me. You won't get me any looser than I am already."

"Sure, Shaggy."

He saw a folded newspaper in Artie's hip pocket. "Let me read that. I'll go crazy lying here."

Artie backed quickly away. He said with lowered eyes, "You don't wanna read now, Champ."

Big Joe got up and snatched at the paper. Artie tried to dodge him and the paper fell to the floor. It opened up and Big Joe saw two things at once.

In the center of the paper was a tight wad of green bills wrapped by a rubber band. The bill on the outside was a fifty. And at the top righthand corner of the paper were two glaring headlines:

VINCE BECKIT HELD ON SHOOTING CHARGE
Shaggy Merrill's Manager Wounded By McKean Girl

Big Joe got as far into the column as: "Only a few hours before his fighter, Shaggy Joe Merrill, was scheduled to contend for the boxing championship of the world, Vince Beckit was shot and seriously wounded by Miss Margie McKean, Beckit's alleged fiancée. Involved in the shooting were John Bennington, a Harvard University student, and Mrs. Valerie Winston . . ."

A man stuck his head in the door and said, "The semifinal's over. All right, guys."

Big Joe looked at Artie. The trainer was shaking, his ugly face hot and red with shame. He couldn't meet Big Joe's eyes.

"Where'd you get that roll, Artie?"

"Listen, Shaggy, I never meant no harm. I was jus' doin' like Vince tol' me—"

"Answer me. Did Vince give you this roll to bet on the fight?"

"Yeah . . . yeah, Shaggy; but honest—"

"Who were you supposed to lay it on, me or the Gunner?"

Artie couldn't answer. His throat worked and his eyes were suddenly wet.

Big Joe said softly, "Vince told you to lay it on the Gunner, didn't he?"

Artie nodded mutely. His agony was in his eyes.

Up above Big Joe could hear the rhythymical stamp of feet, like a giant metronome beating its pendulum impatiently throughout the stadium.

The same man opened the door again and came half way in. "Come on, Shaggy. You can't keep that many people waiting. Where's Vince?"

"I'm coming. We're on our way."

The man said, "Snap into it," and closed the door.

Artie found his voice and it burst out as though he were sobbing: "Honest, Shaggy, I never coulda done it. I come up to his room for instructions and it was filled with cops and Vince slipped me this dough and tol' me to spread it out on the Gunner.

"But I didn't do it. I couldn't. Not against you, Shaggy. Not against my Shaggy boy. You treated us decent, jus' like in the ol' days. I kep' the dough. Twenny bucks of is mine an' I was gonna sink it on you. I was gonna lay it off on the way to the ring . . ."

His words trailed off. Artie looked at Big Joe. Artie was on the level. The little wheels that were broken and rattling in his head would no longer manufacture words. He could only look and hope to be relieved.

Big Joe felt sick and chilly and incredibly old.

"Don't bet your money on me, Artie," he said slowly. "Keep your money."

"Look, Shaggy—"

"We're on our way."

CHAPTER VI

COME OUT FIGHTING

HE WALKED out and down the corridor and through the Yankees' dugout and then down the long aisle between the temporary seats in the infield. Artie and a couple of the handlers followed with a bucket, sponge, towels and the carbonate of ammonia and little articles of first aid.

Big Joe wasn't thinking or hearing or seeing. He made his way automatically. People yelled to him, roared at him, tried to shake hands with him. They tossed paper bags and bits of programs over his head. The cops kept him from being stopped altogether.

He climbed into the ring and waited, holding the ropes lightly and rubbing his feet in the resin box while the announcer made himself heard. He recognized his name as the challenger and pivoted and clasped his hands briefly above his head.

He looked out over the sea of faces. Close to the ring were two empty seats. It occurred to him that they would still be empty at the end of the fight; half an hour from now or two minutes from now. The seats belonged to Margie McKean and Val Winston. *Mrs.* Valerie Winston. He wondered where Val was now.

The referee called them out and he stood there and touched gloves with the Gunner.

"Hello, Gunner."

"Hello, Shaggy, boy."

The Gunner looked like his pictures. He had no expression on his tawny, sleepy-lidded face.

"Make it clean, break when I say, remember I know the rules," the referee said. "Come out fighting," he added laconically.

They went back to their corners. The bedlam freshened. The lights over the stadium went out, leaving the ring very brilliant at the bottom of the white cone of light.

Big Joe took off his robe and worked beside the ropes. He could hear the speculative voice of the crowd nearest his side of the ring as it inspected his chest and shoulders and arms. The crowd, he remembered, never looks at a man's legs. Legs don't seem to matter to crowds.

He turned and worked with his back to the ropes. That way he could see the Gunner, his naked brown torso reflecting the lights as though it had been gilded.

They say the Gunner shuffles, he thought; but they forget that from the waist up he's the fastest thing next to lightning they've ever seen. And that's important. He tried not to think about it.

The crowd quieted with a tremendous quiet and the bell penetrated to every corner of the stadium.

The Gunner was coming out, gliding, shuffling, looking Big Joe over from beneath his heavy lids, his face wearing no expression at all.

Big Joe kept away for a moment as they fenced and moved around. Unless the Gunner was sore at you he usually took it easy for the first two or three rounds. Then he opened up. A few minutes later the Stadium would be empty.

Big Joe licked at him with a tentative left. It was a feint. The Gunner didn't duck. The left caught him at the corner of his mouth. Big Joe crossed his right and brought it over into the center of the Gunner's mouth and the Gunner's head snapped back and the crowd screamed and for some reason got up on its feet.

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

The Gunner shuffled forward and Big Joe caught him twice in the body and once along side his head and twice in the face. The crowd was hysterical. The Gunner kept walking in and Big Joe realized that although he was doing a lot of walloping he was also beating a steady retreat.

He stopped and slugged once more at the lazy indifferent eyes. One of the eyes began to puff a little from that one, he saw.

Then suddenly he was staggering backward and something had exploded in his mouth. Something had kicked him in his mouth. Everything was dark and white and red by turns and there were pinwheels of light revolving around. There was a terrific pain in his mouth. The chalky taste of his mouthpiece went away and in its place was the salty, sticky-warm taste of blood.

The Gunner had hit him.

He opened his eyes. He was surprised to see that he hadn't fallen. He had evidently only taken a few steps backward. The crowd wasn't howling. It occurred to him that he had taken one of the Gunner's lefts and stood up under it.

The discovery made him feel fine.

AND then the bell rang and he was in his corner and Artie Burns was crooning over him. Reality came back. It made him ill.

"It was *your* round, Shaggy boy. My Shaggy boy got himself a round," Artie Burns crooned delightedly. "They scored it eight to two. The judges all give it to you eight to two." Artie went on with his singing.

He's pleased because I won one round, Big Joe thought. *Artie knows how it is.*

Big Joe wouldn't let himself think how it was. It would get him before the Gunner got him if he let himself think how it was.

He went out with the bell and waited for the Gunner to throw one. He dodged it when it came. It hit his shoulder and even though it had missed, it hurt. It reminded Big Joe sharply that the Gunner was the best there was in the world. It was something to think about.

He made the Gunner miss a few more. Then he crouched. The champion admitted he always had trouble when his opponents used this crouch. Vince had capitalized on this, coached Big Joe in its use. Good old Vince.

He hit the Gunner twice from the crouch and then straightened up and hit him again. The crowd began to scream. When they screamed like this, Big Joe remembered, they never griped afterward that they'd paid too much for their tickets.

He rushed in and pounded away. He took a couple of hooks to his ribs and neck for his trouble but he'd caught the Gunner with a couple that were more deadly than hooks. The Gunner was backing away. He wasn't hurrying. But he wasn't as deliberate as he had been. The crowd kept on screaming. Big Joe thought the people in Brooklyn could turn off their radios and tell how the fight was going by listening to the crowd. It was that loud.

The Gunner stopped going backward and started to come in. The bell rang.

Artie crooned softly. His hands worked neatly.

"Oh my Shaggy boy. How you're goin'. Maybe it turns out all right anyway."

One of the handlers on the steps leading down from the ring whispered up, "They give you this one seven to three, Champ."

In the third the Gunner went to work. He was savage. He beat Big Joe around the head and in the face a lot, but Big Joe understood that sort of fighting and that sort of punishment and he took it and gave it and ended strong by driving the Gunner to the ropes with short jabs from his crouch position that the champion hadn't seemed to solve.

And then suddenly in the fourth round Big Joe felt the hopelessness of what he was doing and he moved in and feinted with his left and brought his roundhouse up and around and it landed on the side of the Gunner's jaw and the Gunner dropped on the flat of his back.

He was up immediately and fell into a clinch, but the crowd had seen him knocked down. Big Joe had knocked the Gunner down in the fourth and the crowd knew it and the radio broadcasters up there were yelling it into the mikes and the typewriters around the ring were batting it out and some day Joey would hear about it.

He followed up as soon as the Gunner came away from the ropes. The Gunner protected himself and the round ended. Big Joe was awarded that one ten to nothing and it came to him that he had taken four rounds from the Gunner. Four consecutive rounds.

BUT he sat on the stool, head back, arms taut along the ropes and knew what would happen from now on. Everybody knew what happened to upstarts who knocked the Gunner down.

Only there were a lot of happy people in the stadium who didn't think Shaggy Joe Merrill was an upstart.

The Gunner hit him squarely over the heart to open the fifth. Big Joe stood and stared a moment, surprised at the pain which came in his chest. Then he grabbed his head with his hands and winged his elbows over his chest. He began to notice how difficult it was for him to breathe.

The fifth was the first round the Gunner took. And the sixth was the second. The Gunner was fresh and going well and he took a lot of pride in his work with all his sleepyheaded, shuffling manner. Murder was a word the Gunner wasn't familiar with—except it was what he did with his hands.

Big Joe brought the crowd to its feet once more by taking the eighth with a series of windmill punches which put the Gunner on the defense and momentarily interrupted his methodical disintegration of the Shaggy man who insisted upon going eight rounds with the champion.

But now his chest had ceased to plead with him and was shouting hoarsely. It no longer scratched inside him; it dug; it raked with talons that were sharp and cruel and he expected to see them breaking through his skin at any moment.

He lost track of the rounds as he lost track of each whistling short breath that he drew and thought was his last.

Once, drooped in his corner and feeling the coolness of the sponge on his face, he heard Artie screaming at him from two inches away. Artie was saying something about take another round. Get this round.

He wobbled out into the center of the ring, looking for the sleek, sweating figure of the Gunner and remembering how Vince had called the round for him; called the round that he was to drop his man. It was a joke, now that he understood it. Because Margie McKean had dropped those men; Big Joe hadn't done it.

He found the Gunner and waded in and took two cracks over the heart and dropped to one knee and waited for the full count. He felt he could wait for hours. He didn't know what number the referee was calling. But it was good to wait. You got tired in a ring.

To hold Margie McKean, Vince had had to produce sables and a Buick job and apartments and good times; he had had to make sure the money was around. He'd made sure all right. The guys he papered with bills had fallen in the rounds Vince named. When he'd called 'em for Big Joe, Vince knew what he was calling. You could bet heavy and collect heavy if you bet on Shaggy Joe Merrill and knew the other guy in the ring was going down, and when he was going down.

And all that was only paving the way. Vince had pointed for something big, something sure. Something that would bring in showers for Margie McKean until she'd come to think it would never quit raining dough. Vince had built a cardboard champion for the public and for himself. A champion who would draw the sucker money, who would fold and warp and break when he came to the showdown.

Vince had bet everything he could scrape and beg on the Gunner. He knew how easily a gunner could blast a cardboard target.

Big Joe looked up. The referee had stopped counting. He was staring down at Big Joe. There was a little compassion in his eyes. The dusky shadow of the Gunner was nowhere around.

Big Joe pulled himself up and tried to catch his breath. He located his corner and made for it. Artie was waiting for him. Artie, with his collodion to stop the bleeding, and his salts and the sponge, and the gentlest, kindest hands.

"The bell," Artie screamed. "It saved you, Champ. You got to get another round. You gotta."

Artie wasn't crooning now. His face was an agony of excitement and pleading and hope and fear.

"What round is it?" Big Joe asked wearily.

He didn't hear Artie's answer. The bell whanged and Artie was shoving him out there.

HE remembered going to the corner once or twice more. He heard the far-off sound of the roar of the sea which beat around him. The roar sounded very gentle.

For the first time he looked out at it, over the glistening brown of the Gunner's shoulder as he hung on, and saw the sea surging and buckling and blurring. Then he looked at the Gunner and took a crack at the Gunner's listless mouth. The Gunner slipped away with that effortless glide of his.

Artie was sobbing as he wrapped the cool wet towel briefly around Big Joe's head and combed his hair for appearance's sake.

"The beginnin' of the fourteent'," Artie cried into his ear. "Get this one, Champ, an' he's yours. The fight's yours, you hear? You got seven, Shaggy boy. Get this one. Get this one."

Big Joe limped out to the center. He wished vaguely that he could oblige Artie and get this one. But there wasn't anything left inside him. He was all gone inside. His chest was burning up and his legs felt like he'd stepped into hot tallow grease up to his hips.

The Gunner found him then. He let go with his trip-hammers over Big Joe's heart and he followed with his bullet left to the jaw and Big Joe went down and his chin slid along the canvas and he thought, Joey couldn't ask for any more than I've done. I'll never be the champ but the champ won't have two fights in a year like this and stay champ long. He knows where I've been tonight.

He pushed himself up on an elbow and saw the referee's hands holding up eight fingers.

Count off the other two quick, Mike; I got to get out of here and to a hospital soon. There's something going on inside my chest a doctor wouldn't let go on inside a horse.

His eyes went out over the crowd that was close to the ring and when focus came to them he saw Claire; and sitting beside Claire was Joey.

He pushed himself up on his feet quickly. If lying there on his stomach had made Joey look like that, he didn't ever want to warm the canvas again.

He could still see Claire's face and its loveliness was something that he'd forgotten; something that he had not thought he would see in any woman. And the loveliest part of it was the concern, the deep pain of concern that had been on her face for him.

He walked into the Gunner and belted him. He belted him again and said to himself, "That's for Claire and that's for Joey." He didn't want Val. He didn't want anything except to get rid of the fire in his chest and the brown expressionless face in front of him. He belted the champ with his roundhouse and got rid of the face in front of him.

"That's for the three of us," he said.

The referee made six gestures with his fingers. Then the Gunner was up.

"I said that's for the three of us," Big Joe said and hit him again.

This time the referee got to eight before the Gunner came in. Then the bell sounded and he walked away.

And with him walked Big Joe's chances. The Gunner wasn't spent. And Big Joe knew it. The rest would be all he needed. Now he was mad. He was mad and it showed clear across the ring. He was mad because a guy had stayed fourteen with him; and because the guy had knocked him down twice in the fourteenth and taken the round.

"You done it!" Artie Burns crooned. "My Shaggy boy done it. Now stay this one with him. Just stay this one with him. My Shaggy boy done it!"

Big Joe tried. They can burn the life out of you and belt the bones to powder in you and you can still try if you've got it in you, he thought. That's the best I can do, Joey. The best I've got, Mr. Gunner.

At the very end he fell into a clinch and he saw the timekeeper's arm raise with the little hammer in his hand. He said, "Maybe I've done it."

But he hadn't. And deep under the fire in his breast he knew he hadn't.

The Gunner caught him with the Gunner's left. Caught him where no man should be caught and hope to ever see the following twenty minutes of his life.

The lights swam, the Gunner's indifferent eyes swam, the referee and the ring swam. Only Claire and Joey didn't swim. They stayed still, like the darkness that came to rest finally and completely over him. . . .

CLAIRE said to him, "Can you stand a visitor?" He turned his head from Claire and looked at the screen which shielded the door.

"No," he said. He wondered why hospitals didn't just close doors instead of putting up screens to tantalize. "I

don't want any visitors but you. That's selfish but that's me."

Claire smiled and went to the door. Valerie Winston came in with a nice looking man who might have been a lawyer or a salesman. She introduced him as her husband.

"Doctor Lewis says only a few minutes," Claire said pleasantly. Big Joe had told her about Val. Claire thought she'd feel a great deal happier when Val and her nice looking husband went back to their home in California.

Mr. Winston looked pleased and said, "It's a pleasure to meet a world's champion, Mr. Merrill. To meet the best there is."

Big Joe grinned and said, "It's a pleasure to be one, I hear."

"I wish I'd seen it," Mr. Winston said.

"I wish I had too," Big Joe said. He thought that was a very funny remark.

He didn't know whether it had ever happened before or if it would ever happen again. But he didn't care. Mike Berrigau, the referee, had been in and told him how he hadn't even got to the count of five when the final bell rang.

"Even if you'd been a corpse you'd have been champion," Mike had said, grinning. "I couldn't count a guy out after the fight's ended. I know my rules. And you'd won by a decision and my God how you earned it. Yes, sir. Even if you'd been a corpse—"

But that wasn't exceedingly comical, that remark about the corpse; for that was exactly what Big Joe would be, Doc Lewis had informed him, if he didn't hie himself away to some nice uneventful spot and rest for six solid months.

He and Claire had decided on the bungalow at Pen Mar. That was of course on the condition that no fleahead in the fight racket was using the place for a training spot.

He'd already turned down the clamoring request of the Gunner's manager for a return match in sixty days. Let the Gunner wrestle for the crown with somebody else; Big Joe was relinquishing it as you relinquished a thing that has served its purpose and must be remembered kindly and with pride. And because his chest had done enough whispering and it was good to have an easy silence inside once more.

Now he looked at Val and smiled and listened to her as she told him that her name before her marriage had been McKean and she was Margie McKean's sister.

She nodded to her husband.

"Bob let me come east to sort of bodyguard Margie until she and Vince married. I knew if somebody didn't look after her she'd do something crazy like she did last night."

Margie had gone to Vince's room with the Harvard boy and informed Vince that she and the boy had got married in the afternoon. Vince lost his head and pulled the gun from the drawer and in the shuffle it had gone off and Vince found a bullet in his shoulder.

But Vince, Val said, didn't seem to mind. He'd be in bed for a few weeks and when he got out he'd probably face a stiff line for pulling the gun. But he found a sort of pleasure in the fact that the leather goods business hadn't been worth twenty cents since '33 and the Harvard boy entertained an idea of Margie's working to help him the rest of the way through the university. Val said Vince had laughed a good deal at that despite the pain in his shoulder.

After Val and her husband had gone, Big Joe took Claire's hand and said, "Tell me again."

"About how a man with your ideas and your money ought to be able to set himself up in his own business?"

"No."

"About how I love you?"

"Later."

"About how I didn't run to Dad when you fought?"

"Yes."

"You ought to have known that, Joe. I went to the bungalow. You almost walked in on me one day. I thought Joey would give me away when he saw you through the window."

"But I sent a telegram to your father and asked to see Joey."

"He wired me. I drove my Joey to Baltimore. I couldn't let him listen to your fights. I've been scared for six years, Joe. Ever since Doc Lewis told me. I thought one night we'd be listening and he'd hear his father killed."

"You never told me you knew."

"It would have made it worse for you. You wouldn't have stopped even if you knew."

He squeezed her hand in his big one.

"We had to come to the stadium," she said. "I knew you'd want that no matter what."

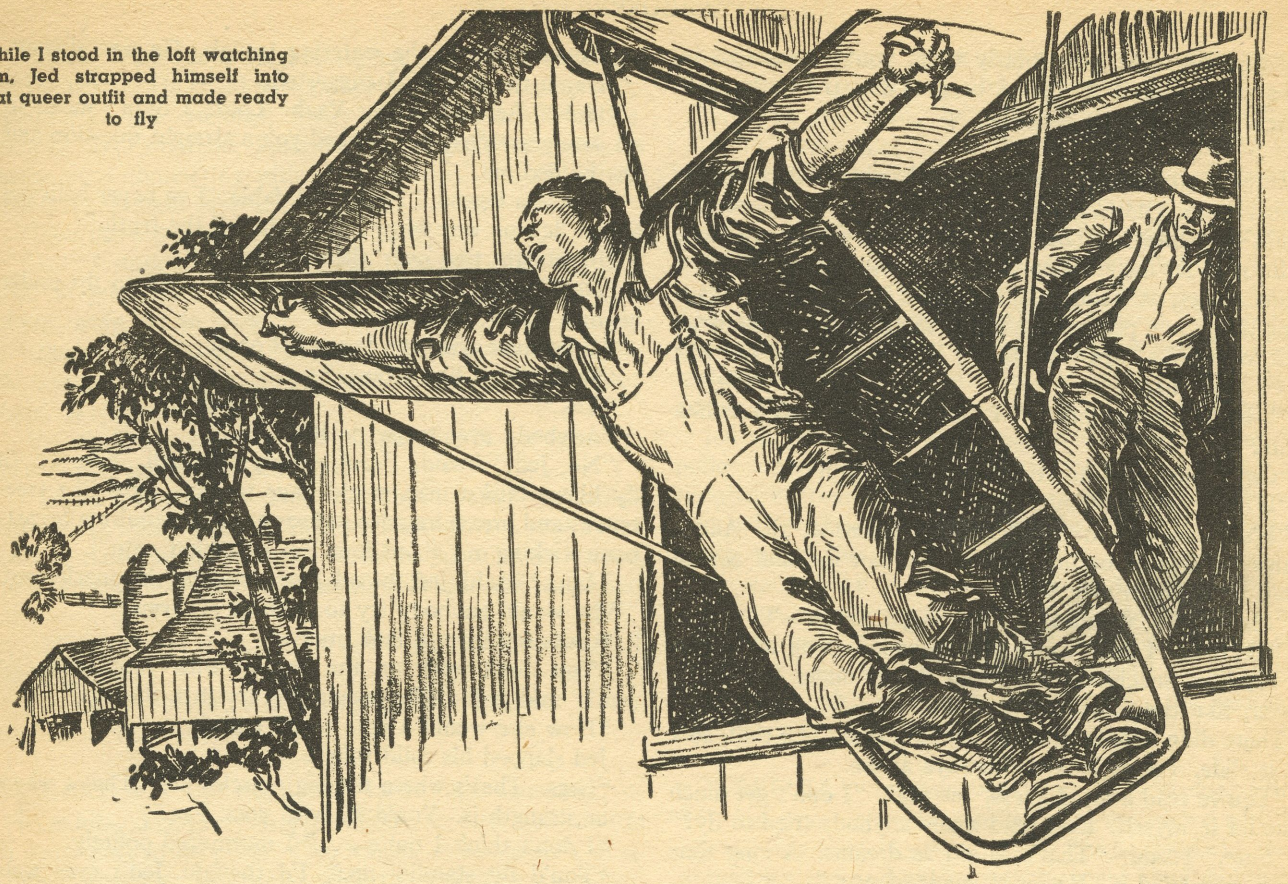
Joey came rushing into the room.

"Hey, Champ," he said. He stopped beside the bed. He kept looking at Big Joe as if he couldn't get enough.

Big Joe ruffled the double crown.

"Call me that again," he said. "Call me that real loud."

THE END



While I stood in the loft watching him, Jed strapped himself into that queer outfit and made ready to fly

To Heaven Standing Up

By Paul Ernst

Author of "Patrioteer", "He Didn't Want Soup", etc.

THE sun was warm on the porch of Walt Bailey's general store, and I let my topcoat slide open and put my feet up on a coil of rope. In the trees on Main Street the birds made songs about spring, and the young fellow stopping in front of the store with a clatter of worn brake rods wore only track shirt and faded khaki pants, it was that balmy.

A fellow named Jed Perley, I remembered vaguely. Worked back in from the shore about five miles for an invalid farmer named Cardwell.

Perley fiddled with the tailgate of his light truck, and I closed my eyes and let the sun get into my bones and drive out the ache planted by pneumonia in March. Nice to loaf a month in this little New Jersey village near the shore.

Perley stumped up the porch steps, nodded to me as he passed the bench on which I was sprawled, and went on in. I closed my eyes till a voice said: "Hello, there. Letting Sol pound Vitamins A, D and G into you?"

Climbing the steps was Singer Smith, black hair uncovered, gray eyes lazy. Singer was a flier. He had a plane in a homemade hangar two miles out of Deerville and picked a free-lance living out of the air by instructing, hiring out for special trips, or dusting crops.

As Singer went in, Jed Perley came back out, carrying a hundred-pound sack of feed effortlessly on his left shoulder. Jed's body was slight but his arms were muscle-corded and his legs filled the legs of his khaki pants with their hard bulk.

He tossed the sack into the truck, stood a moment watching some birds perched on the rim of an old stone watering trough, then came back up on the porch with an odd look—almost of resentment—on his face. After a little hesitation, he sat on the bench next to me, moving his head to follow the short hops of a couple of sparrows near the trough.

"The damn birds!" he muttered.

I looked at him. You get to know people fast in a vil-

The story of a simple-minded farmhand who dressed his dreams in a couple of fishpoles and a little cheap cloth. And of how no others could see that his dreams were true — no others but the wind and the sea

lage like Deerville, particularly when you're interested in folks anyhow, as I've always been. I'd heard Perley discussed. Usually with laughter.

JED was a nice fellow, but not too bright. Good mechanical sense. Old Cardwell, in a wheelchair with arthritis, would be helpless without him. But thick in the wits and inclined to let imagination run away with him.

Sometimes, as Bailey had expressed it, Jed got to imagining things and pretty soon got to thinking they were true. Hell, retorted a man with Bailey at the moment, Jed was just a plain liar. . . .

"Why 'the damn birds'?" I asked now. "Don't you like birds?"

"Oh, I guess so," he said. "But—it's silly."

"What's silly?"

"Well, look at 'em. Ain't got any brains at all. And a man's got lots of brains. But a bird can fly, and a man can't. It's plumb ridic'lous."

"Men fly," I shrugged. "Like Singer Smith—"

"Oh, that! I don't mean that, zooming along with a lot of clanking machinery. I mean flying under your own power, like the birds do."

There didn't seem much to say to a thing like that, so I let it slide. Perley looked sideways at me.

"You've read a lot, I guess," he said. "I don't get much time for it, myself. Ever read where anybody tried to fly?"

"Sure," I said. "That's as old as dreams. A long time ago a man tried it. He made wings of wax."

Perley's face wrinkled up. It was a good, broad face with flaring, peasant's nostrils.

"Wax? Funny stuff to make wings of. What happened?"

"He flew too close to the sun," I said, "and his wax wings melted and he fell."

Perley got up jerkily. "Oh, all right. I was just askin' a polite question."

He went down the steps, stocky thighs filling the legs of his pants. The motor of the ancient truck rattled to a start and Perley drove huffily away. The store owner, Bailey came out, a thin, sad looking man with a handlebar mustache.

"Why do you suppose," he mumbled, more to himself than to me, "Jed Perley wanted a thing like that?"

"Like what?"

Bailey looked after the truck.

"Yesterday. Came in here and got twenty-six yards of glazed chintz I'd ordered to sell the ladies for curtains. What would Jed want with twenty-six yards of glazed chintz? I'm still trying to figure it out."

I shrugged, and after a while I went up the street to my boarding house. Dinner was rich with broth and chicken and potatoes. I'd be hog-fat if I kept that up.

And I'd be even fatter if fate let me drowse on the store veranda bench another month—as I was doing again next afternoon at Bailey's. But my time was almost up, I was sorry to remember. . . .

BRAKE rods clattered at the curb, and Jed Perley climbed out of the ancient little truck. He passed me without nodding, and in the store I heard him ask for two more spools of that heavy waxed thread and a can of shellac. Color? He didn't care. Either orange or white, didn't matter.

He came out, paused, then sat next to me with his eyes on the sparrows at the watering trough. He was gloomy.

"Damn the birds?" I suggested.

"Huh?" he said. "Oh. Yeah. Look, I didn't mean to act sore yesterday, but I asked you a straight question and you kidded me."

"It was a legend," I said. "A fable. I've never believed a man flew on wax wings, either, to tell the truth."

He thought that over, then dismissed it.

"Oh. Well, look. Has any one ever tried to fly under his own steam, no hooey?"

"A lot have tried, no hooey," I said.

"With wings, like a bird?"

"Yes."

"Anybody ever really do it?"

"No, Jed," I said. "And nobody ever will. You see, to fly like a bird a man would have to have arms like tree-trunks and breast muscles so heavy they'd require a breast-bone sticking out about four feet to anchor onto."

"Arms?" said Jed, broad face wrinkling in puzzlement. "Why would anybody try to fly with his arms?"

It was my turn to look puzzled.

"You don't walk on the ground with your arms, do you?" said Jed. "Why would you try it in the air?"

"How else would a man try?" I said.

Jed slapped his solid thighs.

"Legs. That's where the big muscles are. That's where your strength is. You'd fly with your legs."

"I don't think I quite . . ." I murmured politely.

"You'd fly standin' up." I'd thought Jed's eyes were dull. They weren't dull now; they shone with jewel brilliance. "You'd use your legs, mostly—"

He stopped. His eyes got veiled, secretive.

"I got to run along," he said, getting up. "Say, I'd as lief you didn't repeat what—I've been sayin'. Folks in Deerville think I'm not as bright as I ought to be. They'll be callin' me Crazy Perley next, and the kids runnin' after me. I wouldn't want that."

I looked thoughtfully after the ancient truck as it wheezed away from the curb. Jed wasn't as dull as folks thought him, it seemed. He certainly was onto the town's opinion of him, at any rate. Yet in a way he was more childish than most eight-year-olds.

Giving serious thought to the possibility of flying like a bird! And standing up, what was more! Of all the lunatic things to—

"Hi, loafer." Singer Smith was coming up the steps that creaked to so many feet each day.

I nodded to him, but kept thinking of Jed Perley, and of the feverish light in his eyes, and of Bailey's bewilderment at a farm hand's purchase of twenty-six yards of glazed chintz. Enough of the stuff to make a tent.

Singer came back out, tearing the top off a new package of cigarettes.

"Where's Cardwell's farm?" I asked.

Singer told me: west to Sling's Corners, north to the third mailbox, lane over a hill to a hidden house. I got out my car, little used during my convalescence in Deerville, and drove there.

I DIDN'T KNOW quite what I was going to say as I walked in the late sun toward the figure in the vegetable patch at the rear of the house. After all, I didn't know, really, what the chintz was for. Maybe Jed was getting curtain-conscious too, and fixing up the windows for him and the arthritic Cardwell.

"Hel*lo*," said Jed, straightening up as I got to the edge of the patch. He stood with powerful, stumpy legs spread, holding his hoe crosswise in his hands. He looked at me calmly, and whatever laborious opening I'd planned to make went glimmering with his directness. Not as dull as Deerville thought him, this man.

"You came out to see *it*, didn't you?"

"It?" I stalled. But it was silly to evade. "Well, yes, I did. If you'd care to show it to me. Or if there is anything ready yet to show."

"She's ready," said Jed slowly. "I finished her last night. Almost eleven o'clock, and I have to get up at half-past four. But she's worth it."

He studied my face as if committing it to memory. Meanwhile he chewed his upper lip.

"Like I told you," he said, "I wouldn't want to get called around as Crazy Perley. So I ain't let on to a soul about this. I didn't really mean to let on to you. I just wanted to ask a couple questions because you'd read the books and all."

"I'll never let it out so it could get back to you," I assured him.

He led me to the barn and up to the high loft. It was as bad as I'd feared.

THERE was the twenty-six yards, approximately, of chintz. The gayly flowered stuff was stretched taut on a framework of fishpoles. Two frames, rather, each a wing. There were two long poles with the spindling ends bent together and bound. And down the middle was a third pole, for a stiffening spine.

At the thick end, the butts of the poles were split, bound with fishline to keep the split from lengthening, and bolted to a strip of shiny metal that I judged was duralumin. This had a heavy hinge riveted in its center.

"I just happened to see that there chintz," Perley said. His breathing had quickened. He was looking at the pathetic apparatus of fishpoles and cloth as a man looks at his true love. "It's nice and close-wove. With shellac over it, you couldn't ask for a better wing."

The two twenty-foot lengths were lying almost atop each other. Of a little to one side was another part. It, too, was made of the shiny metal. The thing looked at first glance like a plain oval, like a big letter O, made from a bent tube. But a second glance showed that it was not quite that simple.

The top of the O was flattened and bent out like a neck-yoke for carrying two pails of water. At the bottom there were straps, obviously designed to go around feet and ankles. Furthermore, the top half of the frame fitted into the bottom half so the O could be lengthened and shortened like the slide of a trombone. It was about four feet long.

"A couple minutes to bolt the hinges, and she's done," Jed's feverish voice came to me.

I looked at him, and at the frail contraption of bamboo poles and glazed chintz.

"Look here, Jed," I said. "It's one thing to daydream of equipping yourself with wings. Better men than either of us have done that. But it's something else again actually to try. I suppose you're going to strap on those things and step off the barn roof?"

"Why, no, of course not," said Jed, looking almost as puzzled as he had when I'd spoken of flying in terms of arms. "Think I want to break my damn neck? Here, I'll show you. I want to give 'er a little workout anyhow. Only take a minute. Show you what I mean right now."

He carried the wings and the O downstairs.

"No, you stay here," he said, when I started to follow.

"Here," was a spot next to the loft door, from which you looked down about twenty feet to the ground. Overhead, a beam ran out the door with a pulley in the end. Through the pulley went the rope to which the hayrack was fastened when hay was to be hoisted from a wagon to the loft.

From above, I watched him bolt the wings to the top of the oval. His hands were trembling a little. I felt sorry for Jed at one moment, and impatient with a grown man for harboring such an obsession in the next. It put him in among the inventors of such things as perpetual motion.

Jed slipped a hook in the top of the ring and tied the pulley rope to it. Then he made a last addition: a slim bar slanting in from about the center of each wing to the bottom half of the O, so that when the O was elongated the wings would flap.

He came back upstairs, hauled on the rope, and the ridiculous arrangement raised till the bottom of the O was level with the loft floor. Jed fastened the rope to a cleat, and there the thing hung, an O with a winged top: —o—, and with a slanting support from the middle of each wing to the bottom section of the O.

CAREFULLY he swung out from the loft door till his feet were on the bottom bar. It went down with him till his legs were almost straight. He buckled the straps around his feet and ankles with his right hand, holding on with his left. Then he straightened.

The top yoke settled snugly around the back of his neck, over his shoulders. He thrust his arms along the middle spines of the flimsy wings, where a hoop came just above each elbow, another at each armpit, and a bar for each hand to grip.

How to fly standing up, in one easy lesson, I thought.

It was almost dusk now, but Jed looked carefully in all directions, as if fearing some one might see from a distance. This end of the barn faced away from the house, so no one could look from there.

"You see how she works?" said Jed, with a note almost of pleading in his voice. "I push down with my feet and at the same time pull down with my arms. That way I get arms and back, shoulders and legs—everything—into it when I haul down on the wings. There're heavy coil springs to go into the sliding bars too, to help me shove down hard and quick. Just my weight hangin' on the wings will raise 'em on the upstroke. I won't trouble to put the springs in now."

I shook my head a little, but I was much relieved. At least Jed probably wouldn't kill himself. The rough common sense of the hook arrangement guaranteed that.

He stood there in the shiny hoop. Experimentally he fanned the crazy planes of gay chintz up and down, slowly, like a moth drying its wings after emerging from its cocoon. Legs and arms worked in unison, bringing the wings down in smooth, powerful sweeps, with a springy feathering at the ends as the pliant bamboo bent a little.

"If I can lift myself off the hook," he mused, "I can keep myself up at least a minute or two so I won't fall. If I can't raise off the hook—well, I won't fall that way."

As if impatient, or suddenly bursting with pentup energy, he brought the crude wings down with a whistling sweep of arms and legs. And then was stone-still, crouched in the hoop.

"Did you—see that?" he whispered, after a moment.

"See what, Jed?" Not for anything would I have laughed at him. This thing was too real, too tremendous, to him.

"The rope slacked up! I could feel it! I *lifted* myself a little! Maybe only an inch. But if I can do it an inch, without even the coil springs to help the down shove, I can do it a foot. Or a hundred feet."

"It's pretty dark," I said apologetically. "I couldn't see."

I went out into the lowering night and drove back to Deerville, after assuring Jed I'd keep his secret. I'd seen what I came to see: Jed wasn't in any danger of killing himself with his fool notion. Beyond that, I washed my hands of it.

Funny, though, what the power of suggestion can do to you. There in the door of the hayloft, in the dusk, for just an instant in that last sweep of wings, I actually thought I *had* seen the rope slacken and the hook slide loosely in the ring of the flying frame.

OVERNIGHT, I forgot the silly business pretty completely, being reminded of it again only late next afternoon when Jed Perley rattled to the curb and passed my bench with a conspiratorial nod. He came out with a loaf of bread and a box of table salt, looked around cautiously, then paused beside me.

"I came in to tell you," he said, in a low, hurried tone. "I didn't really have no call to get bread. I just wanted to tell you."

I thought he didn't have quite as much color as usual, and his eyes looked as if he needed sleep.

"I went on workin' them wings after dark," he breathed. "And I put the springs in the frame. I really put my back into it."

He stared at me with too-bright eyes.

"I got off that hook!"

I had, it appeared, let myself in for something by the purely natural desire not to let any man, even a fool, kill himself. I'd made myself a fellow conspirator by looking at Jed's flowered-chintz wings. The fact that I'd now lost all interest in Jed's delusions wasn't going to let me off.

I wondered what had happened to the hook, that it had failed him. Probably in his gyrations it had twisted sideways and his hoop had slid off.

"Don't you believe me?" said Jed.

"Oh, sure," I said. "What happened then?"

"Well . . . nothing much." Jed looked sheepish. "I batted back against the barn on the way down, but didn't hurt nothin'. It'll be a trick to steer, with no tail. But bats make out with nothing but wings, so I guess a man can. I put in some more hours, not trying to lift off the hook any more, just slanting the wings around to guide me."

I understood the sleepless look, then.

"When did you rest last night, Jed?"

"Two in the morning to four-thirty," he admitted. "Keeping the farm going is a long day's job. But gosh, I can't sleep all night every night when I got flying right at the tips of my fingers."

WALT BAILEY came out on the store porch, and Jed said so long and went to his truck. Bailey looked after him, then grinned at me. "Is Jed gassing about some new contraption?"

"Oh, is he given to contraptions?" I asked.

"Yeah. He's turned out some gadgets that were honeys. To hear him tell it, anyway. Last year it was heat from the sun so you'd never have to buy coal in winter."

"That would be handy," I said.

Bailey's eyes twinkled.

"Jed got twenty foot of four-inch pipe and a hundred-gallon tank from a junk yard. He capped one end of the pipe and led the other through the house wall to the tank, set in his back room. He braced a couple dozen big reading lenses in a row over the pipe, with an old clock to turn 'em with the sun, and they focused like burning glasses.

"All fall, to hear him tell it, the water got hot in the day's sun and stayed hot in his room till morning. Didn't need any other heat at all. Then a couple of us reckoned we'd drive out and see it."

Bailey laughed.

"He got out of it kind of smart, at that. Day before we were coming was hotter than November had a right to be. Jed raced in and said his tank had blown up, it got so hot, and Cardwell wouldn't let him set it up again because scalding water had flooded the whole first floor and scared the old man so he fell sideways out of his wheelchair. Jed said he just hadn't thought to put in a safety valve for the steam."

. . . Next day was rainy and unpleasant so I didn't go to the store. I stayed in my room and stewed, and knew I was well again. Time to get back to the city and my job. . . .

There was a tap at my door just before dinner. Jed Perley came in. I'd sure let myself in for something.

"I did it!" he said, voice quivering, before I could even say hello. "I flew last night! More'n a hundred yards. And I only stopped then because I was gettin' too high and didn't quite know how to handle myself. I came down behind the house after circling the barn." He laughed shakily. "I didn't make out so good when I landed. Skinned my knees."

"I wanted you to know," he said tensely. "She works. She goes like a dream. And easy? It's easiern' learning to ride a bike. More'n a hundred yards! You know what I'm going to do tonight? I'm going clear to the shore and back. That's ten miles, but I can do it. It's hard to get up—hard as hell—but once you're there you don't have to work much. You can kind of coast, with only a flip once in awhile to keep up—"

There were steps and the door opened on Singer Smith.

"Hi," he began. Then he saw Jed. "Oh— Hello."

Jed's mouth clamped shut and his eyes got veiled.

"Just goin'," he mumbled to Singer. He looked at me with his face blank. "I just thought I'd tell you. . . . 'Night."

Singer looked at the door with raised eyebrows but didn't comment on the visit.

"Thought I'd drop in for a few words with the patient," he said. "Also I wanted to ask if you're well enough to take a ride. I'm to hop to Boston tomorrow. Be back fairly late, but surely before midnight. Want to go along?"

It was tempting but the papers had predicted rain and squalls, and I thought I'd better not spit in the pneumonia tiger's eye by accepting. "Thanks for the offer, though," I told him.

I HAD a hunch Jed would show up next afternoon. He did. He got to the store about four, looked around to see that we weren't being watched, and sat down.

"Well, I did it," he said in a low tone. "I took a long one last night. Only the second night, too. You know, I feel as if I'd been doing that all my life. You got no idea how easy it is, once you get the feel of it. And once you're up."

"You took a long flight?" I said. "Where did you go?"

He looked shrewdly at me.

"You don't seem too excited about it."

"You wouldn't want me to raise my voice or do anything to draw attention to us, would you?"

"No. . . That's right. I went to the shore last night. Ten mile, there and back. I wasn't really sure I'd get that far, but it was so easy, once I was high, that I just kept on going. Besides there was a breeze last night, coming in from the sea. I thought it would be a help on the way back."

He was silent a moment, scowling.

"Well?" I prompted him.

"I rode her back, all right," he said. "But by the time I got near home the breeze was a spanking wind. Sailed me right on by. I couldn't do a thing till I got clear to Mooretown. Then she slacked a little and I landed. And that fixed me. I'd forgot I couldn't get up again."

"Why not?"

"I got to hang from something," Jed reminded me. "I got to have wing room. I can't just hop up like a damn bird because I got to use my legs for pulling, not hopping. So it looks like two things lick me. One is a hard wind—it carries me right along with it and there's nothing I can do about it. The other is settin' down away from home.

"I had to walk all the way from Mooretown carrying those damn wings. Sixteen mile. And every time a car came along I had to duck off the road. I'd have looked pretty funny in a pair of headlights carryin' them wings."

"You'd better get some sleep," I said.

"Sleep?" Jed shook his head, eyes fever bright. "When I can fly? Why, it's goin' straight to heaven, that's what it is. Even taking off is wonderful." He drew his powerful legs up and shot them down in unison with his muscular arms.

"Like this and like this and like this. You strain and you grunt and you put everything you got into it. And then you're up there, and you sail a little like a chicken hawk while you rest, and you flap a little and turn your arms to slant your wings for a swoop down and a swoop up. . . . Mister, I couldn't sleep when I could be doin' that."

"I'd like to see that, Jed," I said.

"You'll see it. I got 'er down right now. I'm going up once again, tonight, to the shore and back. Then, day after tomorrow, Saturday afternoon, I'm goin' to give a public demonstration."

His jaw squared solidly. "There's some in this town that have called me a liar when I told 'em of things. This'll fix that. I'll let 'em have a look at me, soarin' like the birds—"

Bailey's steps sounded in the store on the way to the door. Jed gave me a quick nod, and got into his truck.

THE sky was lowering then, and the wind was freshening. We were going to have the squalls and rain predicted. I'd been sorry during the sunny forenoon that I hadn't taken Singer up on the Boston trip, but I was glad now.

I continued to be glad as it blew and spat till about ten that night. Singer would be jouncing in rough air. But it developed that he'd have the last leg in peace, because just after ten the sky cleared, with moon and stars bright.

Though I noticed as I went to bed at eleven that a hard, constant wind had suddenly come up out of the clear west, to blow out to sea with enough force to rattle the windows.

The wind suddenly reminded me of Jed—and I smiled. Good old Jed. Imaginative Jed. He'd said the wind licked him, and he'd said he was going to fly to the shore again tonight. And here was a hard offshore wind suddenly sprung up out of nothing.

He'd have a tale to tell tomorrow! How he had been borne on the wind, past the shoreline, out to sea. Out, out, till he had finally managed to turn and struggle back, barely escaping a watery grave. It would be gorgeous.

The wind died some time in the dawn because when I strolled to the store about ten next morning it was sunny and calm. I sat regretfully on the bench; regretfully because this was my last day. Tomorrow I went back to town and to a job. . . .

Singer Smith waved genially at me as he came toward the porch. I watched him come up the steps, and inside the store I heard the phone ring.

"Have a good trip yesterday?" I asked Singer.

"Not good, not bad," he said. "Just as well you didn't go, though. Rough for a convalescent on the way home."

Walt Bailey appeared at the door.

"Say," he called, "either of you seen Jed Perley today?"

Singer shook his head. I said, No, why?

"Old man Cardwell just phoned a second time since seven o'clock to ask if he's around here. He ain't been on the farm all morning and Cardwell's worried."

"Well, I haven't seen him," I shrugged.

"I guess he'll be back soon," Bailey said, turning away. "Cardwell says all his things are there, and the truck. Said for a while he thought maybe Jed had hurt himself out in the barn. Jed's been out there half of most nights, lately. But Cardwell managed to hobble out, and there was no sight of Jed. So he guesses Jed ain't hurt."

HE WENT back to his counters, and Singer looked at me half humorously and said, "What, would you say, is the biggest bird there is?"

"The condor, I guess," I answered. "They're said to get up to twelve foot wingspread. South America. Why?"

"Twelve feet, eh? That's smaller than— And you wouldn't see one around New Jersey, would you?"

I stared at him.

"Funny thing last night," said Singer. "I was coming down the shoreline about midnight, not more than a thousand feet up, almost ready to swing inland to my hangar."

He lit a cigarette, and looked at the flame of the match.

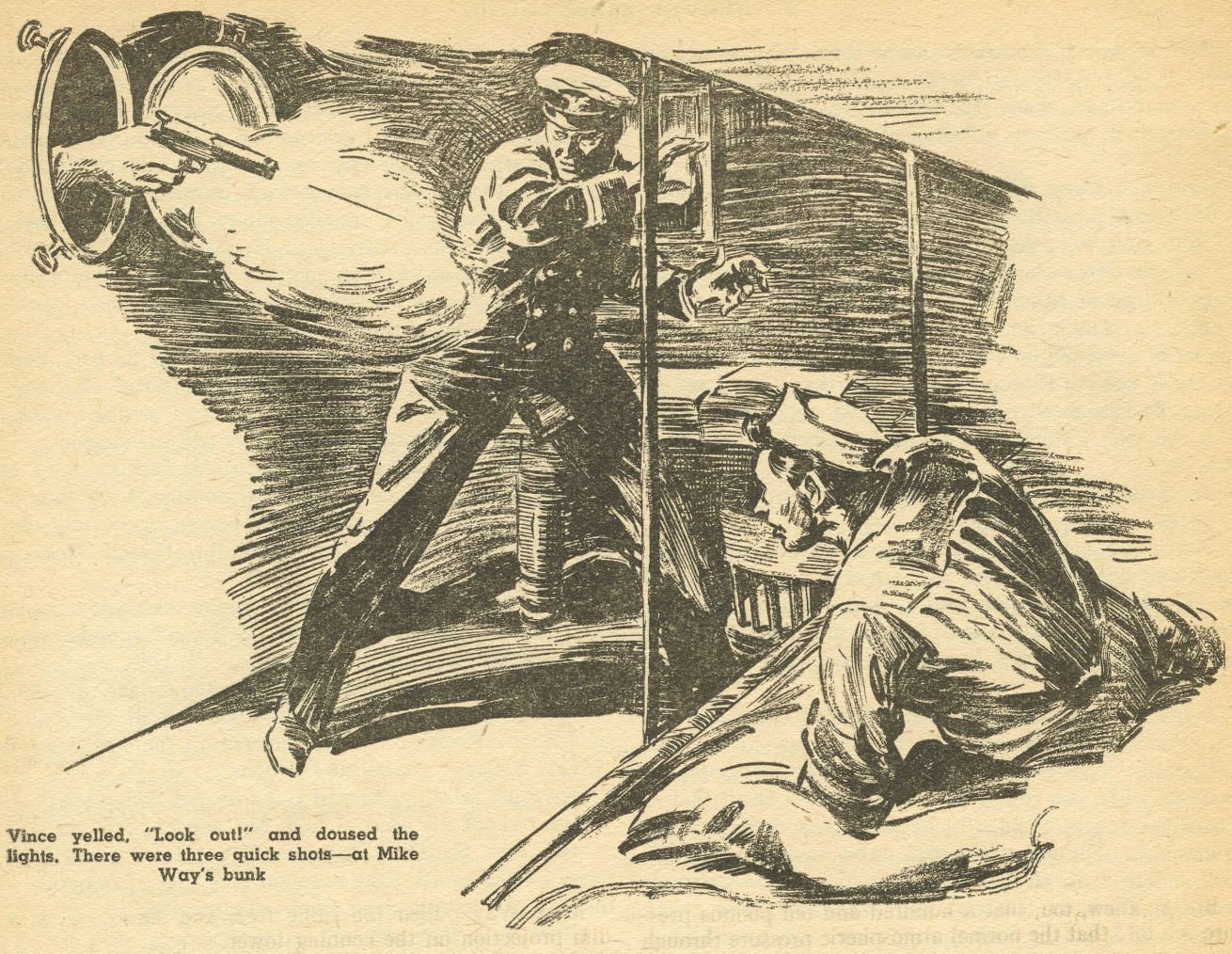
Suddenly I found that I wasn't breathing. And, suddenly, I found that my hands were clamped over the edge of the bench as if it were about to buck and throw me off.

"I thought I saw something like a great big bird, against the stars, for a couple of seconds. But a hell of a big thing, three times as big as your twelve-footer, riding the wind out and out to sea. So big that of course I couldn't have seen anything at all. . . ."

He laughed and flicked the match over the porch rail.

"Getting potty in my old age. Pink elephants, or something. I guess my eyes were tired. You know how your eyes can play tricks on you when—

"What in the *world* is the matter with *you?*"



Vince yelled, "Look out!" and doused the lights. There were three quick shots—at Mike Way's bunk

Murder Goes to Sea

By Allan R. Bosworth

THERE'S a killer on board the *U.S.S. Consolation*—hospital ship of the Pacific Fleet—and Naval Surgeon VINCENT AYRES has been assigned the job of finding out who it is. Meanwhile the *Consolation* is standing by *U.S.S. Algonquin*, which is trying to rescue men still trapped in a sunken submarine.

LIEUTENANT MCQUAID, engineering officer of the Navy's new submarine *Starfish*, has been murdered—his head crushed by a blunt instrument—in the Sick Officers' Quarters of the Naval hospital on the California coast.

The crime followed the mysterious sinking of the *Starfish* on a trial run, with the loss of twenty-two men in the flooded after compartment. Besides McQuaid, those rescued on the first trip of the *Algonquin's* diving bell were:

LIEUTENANT EVERETT BRILL II, the submarine's commander, whom McQuaid had accused of being drunk after an altercation on the boat, and who is now being held under arrest;

MIKE WAY, chief torpedoman and master diver, who has now jumped ship from the *Consolation* and gone over to the *Algonquin* to dive for survivors—and for a bottle he took from Brill's pocket and hid before their rescue;

CARDONI, machinist's mate, who had threatened McQuaid because Cardoni's brother was in the doomed after compartment when McQuaid shut the door against the inrushing water;

KOWALSKI, another sailor; and JOHN THORPE, the jittery youngster of the crew;

Two civilian observers for Westco Iron Works, builder of the *Starfish:* VICTOR MELHORNE, chief engineer, and FOSTER BEDELL, naval architect.

All of these men were in S.O.Q. when McQuaid was murdered. But there were others there that night, all of them close to the crime:

GRUFF old ADMIRAL J. K. WETHERBEE, retired, laid up with a broken leg, whose carefully kept journal is throwing interesting light on what happened;

EVELYN BRILL, the submarine commander's daughter, who is following the family career as a Navy nurse;

MARTIN WEST, submarine builder, who is worried more about his Government contract for more boats than about the men left in the *Starfish;*

BARBARA, his cafe-society daughter, who has admitted to Dr. Ayres that she was on a balcony near McQuaid's room at about the time of his murder; and explained that she had gone to see Victor Melhorne, to whom she is secretly engaged.

A broken billiard cue taken from young Thorpe by the night watchman, shortly after the murder, shows traces of blood—but Thorpe cannot explain how he got it. He appears

This story began in the Argosy for March 15

to be dazed and frightened; and at length goes on a sleep-walking tour which takes him into the old admiral's cabin. Just before coming to, he attempts to seize the admiral's logbook.

Then Wop Cardoni is murdered—strangled in his berth; and Thorpe, who was Cardoni's roommate, disappears. . . .

CHAPTER XV

PIGBOAT UNDER PRESSURE

THE green of the water turned murky blue. Mike Way could feel the pressure, now, as he slid down the descending line. He had to swallow continually to crack his ears open; the air roared in his helmet, and the talker on the *Algonquin's* deck was keeping up a running fire of conversation.

"How you doing now, Chief? Feel all right?"

"Okay," Mike grunted.

"You'd better shake it up. That civilian tug over yonder is going to send a diver down if we don't make it this time. You're down two hundred. See anything?"

"I can see maybe thirty feet," Mike Way said. He gave himself more air. The pressure was becoming a part of him: It was in his tissues, in the blood and bone. It had to be equal, in his suit and in his body, to the pressure of the sea against that inflated diving rig. And at forty fathoms, the pressure of the sea was nearly a hundred and ten pounds to the square inch.

Mike Way didn't want to think about this. He had to keep his mind as clear as was possible to do the job he had come down to do. He knew that the talker on deck expected him to report every move he made; when a man began losing consciousness from the pressure, his words became thick and disconnected.

But he knew, too, that a hundred and ten pounds pressure is a lot; that the normal atmospheric pressure through which we walk on the surface amounts to only about thirteen pounds to the square inch.

He valved in more air, and gripped the descending line more tightly. Must be near the bottom, now. If a man landed on the whaleback of that submarine and then slipped suddenly to the ocean floor, a fatal "squeeze" would result; for the pressure would change too rapidly.

He leaned forward, trying to look down. A shadowy hulk rose out of nothingness and straggled into the murk. Mike Way's voice lifted, flat and distorted under the pressure, into his telephone:

"I see her! I see the *Starfish!*"

His weighted shoes struck the wooden deck grating. He knew that twenty-five men in the torpedo room, up forward, would be hearing that welcome thump. Lieutenant James, the executive officer. Stevens, the radioman who'd been doing most of the hull-tapping. And Salty Adams, the tough and tattooed first class torpedoman, one of Mike Way's own gang.

The trouble was, he told himself, that Salty and the rest had heard divers on deck before. Several of them, since that downhaul cable carried away after the first trip of the rescue bell.

They had heard divers on deck, and, after a while—when the pressure got a man—they didn't hear him any more. He was hoisted to safety, while those in the submarine tried to crack jokes and tell themselves the next man would be able to secure that cable. . . .

"I'M on the submarine," Mike Way reported. "Send down that cable. Damn you guys, why didn't you keep that descending line forward, where the first diver came down—when *I* was inside this pigboat?"

"Downhaul cable starting down!" the talker answered. "You be careful, Chief. Don't slip over the side, now. Well, I'll tell you how it was. After that cable carried away, it came up a blow, see? We dragged our anchor. So we had to put down a grapnel, and—You okay, Chief?"

"I'm okay," Mike said, but he could feel the pressure numbing his brain. "You shoot me that line. I'm okay."

"It's coming. Well, we had to drag the grapnel until we found her again. This time, we caught her aft."

Seconds later, Mike understood. He said, "That's a hell of a note. Don't you drag the anchor now, sailor. Not with me down here."

The downhaul cable, shackled to the descending line, slid against his hands. He could understand why those other men had had trouble. This cable had to be unshackled and moved forward. And with every lurch of the Algonquin over a swell, the cable had a tendency to fly out of a man's hands.

"Ease off on the cable," Mike said. "Give me some slack."

He felt for his sheath knife, and cut the bit of line that shackled the cable to the descending line. He felt the pull of a swell two hundred and forty feet up, but he clung grimly to the cable and risked being jerked from the submarine's deck. Slack came, and he began walking.

"I'm going forward. I'm going past the conning tower. On the starboard side."

They could hear him. Mr. James, and Stevens and Salty. And the others. Shipmates. They could hear his weighted shoes coming nearer. . . .

"I'm going past the conning tower," he repeated, and then the cable caught on something.

"You said that," the talker shot back at him. "Where are you now?"

Mike Way pulled the cable free, and stared up at a dim projection on the conning tower.

"That doesn't belong there," he said. "That's wrong . . . ought to tell the skipper . . . tell Dr. Ayres. . ."

"Hey! The pressure getting you?" demanded the man on deck. "Are you okay?"

"Sure!" Mike Way pulled himself back to the task at hand. "Sure, I'm all right. I'm nearly to the escape hatch . . . I'm on the escape hatch, now. I'm getting ready to shackle the cable to the hatch bail. . ."

This was the job at hand. Fix it so the rescue chamber could come down and take out those twenty-five men. Three trips, and they'd all be safe. The pressure bit into a man's blood and bone; it pounded into his ears and squeezed his brain. But he could beat it. He could win out.

"No bubble between my ears!" Mike Way growled. A man got a bubble between his ears, he was no good. Not for Navy diving.

"What's that?" the talker asked. "Chief, what are you doing?"

"I'm securing this damned downhaul cable," Mike said thickly. "I've got it secured. . . . I'm walking over to the starboard rail. I'm at the rail, now, and you can hoist me."

Faintly, far away, he heard something in the telephone, above the roar of the compressed air and the flutter of the exhaust valve at the back of his helmet. He felt his lines grow taut, and he was being lifted from the submarine's deck.

Mike Way couldn't know that what he had heard was a cheer that burst from the throat of every man aboard the *Algonquin.* He was pulled up to the hundred-foot depth, and the diving stage had been lowered that far. He climbed on it and began a weird series of calisthenics down there under the sea; began exercising in an effort to help his blood throw off its excess of nitrogen.

It would be nearly an hour before he was on the *Algonquin's* deck, allowing for proper underwater decompression; and he'd have to spend a couple of hours in the recompression chamber aboard the salvage tug in order to escape the bends.

For the first time, he became conscious of pain in those injured ribs. But he was in a hurry to get topside—to get word to Dr. Vince Ayres. Mike Way thought he had discovered something important on the *Starfish.*

CHAPTER XVI

THORPE'S BLOOD

AT THE moment, Vince was learning the curious and somewhat alarming reason for Martin West's regained self-importance and assurance. He had been questioning the shipbuilder about the contracts for construction of a score of Navy submarines.

"Do you still fear, Mr. West, that your chief competitor—Pacific Maritime—may win those contracts from you?"

West looked up quickly. "Not as much as I did. You see, the *Starfish* was the first ship to be delivered. If its trials came out all right, the contracts were certain to be approved. Of course we went ahead, with six other ships on the ways. When the *Starfish* sank, I was worried—plenty."

"But you aren't any more? Why?"

"I'm almost positive that what happened to the *Starfish* was not due to any structural fault. I think when she is raised, I'll be borne out in that confidence."

"I see," Vince nodded. There was an implication here that went beyond West's words. "Where do you think the blame lay?"

West paused a moment, as if to choose his words; and then he said:

"Why, in the human factor. Man failure."

Vince looked sidewise at Evelyn Brill. She was taking notes on this interview, as she had on the others.

"Will you please explain that statement?" Vince asked.

Martin West looked at the girl, and hesitated. He said, "Could I talk to you alone?"

"Miss Brill is taking a stenographic record," Vince said. "I'd like her to note everything that is said."

"But this—this might embarrass her, doctor. I don't want to hurt her feelings."

Evelyn Brill raised her gray eyes. They were impersonal and cool, now. She said, "Please go on, Mr. West."

"I think," the shipbuilder began slowly, "that the captain—Lieutenant Brill—erred in some way. There are so many responsibilities resting on the captain of a submarine; it would be only human to forget something. Such as failing to ascertain if all the induction valves are closed before giving the order for a full crash dive. You—you see what I mean?"

"Yes," Vince said. "What makes you think this?"

West hesitated again. "This is more serious!" he blurted. "I'm not accusing Lieutenant Brill; please understand that. I'm not accusing him of the murder—the murders. But after studying the case, I have come to the conclusion that he alone had sufficient motive.

"His negligence had to be covered up. McQuaid intended to testify that Brill was intoxicated; McQuaid was killed. Cardoni might possibly have known what went on back aft; and Cardoni was killed. That left Thorpe, who also might have remembered something that would incriminate the skipper, after his shock wore off—and Thorpe has disappeared.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Miss Brill."

VINCE watched the flush creeping into Evelyn's cheeks. She was more lovely than ever when she was angry, he decided. He shook his head when West had finished.

"The assumption that Brill might have killed McQuaid perhaps could be called as logical as any theory we've so far developed," he said. "The commandant may have acted on the same suspicion when he ordered Brill arrested.

"But that arrest causes the entire theory to collapse when it is applied to Cardoni's murder. If the same man killed both—and you'll agree that's likely—Lieutenant Brill must be left out. He's been locked up since yesterday morning, as you know."

"I was coming to that," West said. He leaned forward, his gray face intense. "Dr. Ayres, I was on deck last night with Bedell and Melhorne. We watched the lights of the *Westsal*—our salvage boat—as she steamed up."

"I know." Vince nodded. "I saw you there."

"Well, when we went below again, we—we saw Brill in the passageway. *Near Cardoni's room.* He could have been leaving it. He certainly wasn't locked up just then. Bedell and Melhorne will bear me out in this statement."

Evelyn's pen faltered. Vince saw that her cheeks had gone white, and her hand was trembling. He said, "You're sure? Was anybody with him—a guard?"

"It was Lieutenant Brill. And he was alone."

Vince rose heavily. "Thank you, Mr. West," he said. "I'll question Lieutenant Brill about the matter."

IT WAS nearly time for the noon meal. Vince dismissed the others, and thought he saw triumph in Barbara West's dark eyes when she looked at Evelyn. He sat on a corner of the nurse's desk and thoughtfully lighted a cigarette.

Evelyn said in a strained voice, "Well—it gets worse instead of better. Poor Dad! Vince, if he is tried for this thing, it won't make much difference how the trial comes out: it'll kill him, one way or the other. His career will be ruined, and that's his life."

"Don't give up the ship, matey!" Vince smiled. He reached out to squeeze her hand. "I know this looks bad, but it probably will be proved purely coincidental. I think Mr. West, encouraged by his daughter, is indulging in a lot of wishful thinking along deductive lines."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I may be guilty of wishful thinking, too," Vince confessed. "But the change in West's attitude, and that of his daughter, might mean that a load has been taken off their minds by the fact that they've been able to figure out that your father is the guilty person.

"In other words, perhaps they've been hoping two things: West, that there *wasn't* anything wrong with the submarine he'd built; and Barbara, that Victor Melhorne didn't have anything to do with McQuaid's murder. Ever since she saw that man on the balcony, she's been secretly afraid that Melhorne was the killer.

"Oh, this is all speculation, Evelyn, but what else have we got right now?"

The girl sighed. "It doesn't help Dad, I'm afraid. Unless he can explain. He has one more thing to explain, now."

A messenger from the radio room entered the ward. Vince sprang up from the desk to sign for the yellow communications sheet. He read it swiftly, and then held it out so that Evelyn could see.

RADIO NINETEENTH NAVAL TWELFTH 1139 BT LIEUT, VINCENT AYRES MC USN USS CONSOLATION BT NIGHT WATCHMAN MCCARTHY VERY MUCH AFRAID OF LOSING JOB BUT FINALLY RELUCTANTLY ADMITTED HE STRUCK THORPE NIGHT OF MURDER WITH BILLIARD

CUE AFTER WRESTING IT FROM THORPE'S HANDS. EXPECT TO BE ABLE TO TRANSMIT OTHER INFO YOU REQUESTED LATER TODAY. BT SIMMONS
TOD 1146.

"There," said Vince, "goes part of the case we had built up against young Thorpe—in spite of Melhorne's certainty that the boy is the killer. It was Thorpe's blood on the club. Of course, it was raining. There could have been blood on the billiard cue already."

"Vince," said Evelyn, "you'd make a better defense attorney than a prosecutor, I'm afraid."

He smiled. "I guess so. I've officiated at two courts martial, both times for the defense. Well, I'm glad to learn this, even if it doesn't help us any right now."

"It doesn't help John Thorpe, either," she reminded him. "It might have—if the report had come last night. Before he fell or was pushed over the side."

Vince Ayres smiled strangely. "Remember what I said, matey! Don't give up the ship. And don't believe Thorpe is dead until they've found his body."

CHAPTER XVII

"I GOT TO DIVE AGAIN"

THE *Algonquin's* rescue bell made its first descent before noon. Something of the joyful excitement that reigned aboard the rescue ship was transmitted to the *Consolation,* but there was tenseness, too. The sea was fully as rough as it had been before, when the downhaul cable parted.

Vince Ayres knew it would be almost useless to attempt to question anybody while the anxiety was upon them, and so he recessed the investigation for the time being. Evelyn Brill went to Admiral Wetherbee's room.

She found him reading Mahan's *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future.* He put the book aside, with a twinkle in his sea-blue eyes that belied the gruffness of his voice.

"Well, sit down, sit down. I suppose you're feeling better about things."

She shook her head. "Worse. Mr. West just told us that he saw Dad near Cardoni's room last night about the time the murder was committed. That will be brought out if Dad comes to trial. And just when I thought the Cardoni murder at least cleared Dad of any suspicion in the other one—because I thought he was locked up in his room!"

Admiral Wetherbee snorted and reached for his logbook. "Everybody thinks—gets nowhere. Listen to an entry I made last night," he said. "'2130'—that's half-past nine—'2130 Received Lieut. Everett Brill, USN, commanding *USS Starfish,* for questioning concerning loss of his ship. 2145 Completed examination of Lieut. Brill.'"

Evelyn said, "He was here, then! But that doesn't clear him. He was here only fifteen minutes. And the sentry must have brought him. Where was the sentry when West saw him? West says he was alone."

"I wouldn't want to get that sailor on the report," the Admiral said thoughtfully. "Fact is, I sent him to see if he could find me a turkey leg. Before he came back with it, your father had finished telling me all he knew about the *Starfish,* and had gone on back to his room.

"Irregular, yes; but I'll assume responsibility for it if anything is said. After all, a strict guard is idiotic in his case. Just a matter of form."

He was minimizing the irregularity, Evelyn knew, for her benefit. There was something under the surface, here; she felt that the shaggy-browed old man knew something he wasn't telling her just now—something of importance.

"I'm discouraged at our failure to find one tangible clue," she said. "We could never prove, now, that John Thorpe did the killings—even if he really were the murderer. Unless they are definitely solved, there'll be a cloud that will hang over Dad the rest of his time in the Service. You know that.

"Oh, I ought to be happy that rescue seems so near for the rest of his men. But I suppose I'm selfish. Those twenty-five men can't help us any."

ADMIRAL Wetherbee frowned. "Don't be too sure about that," he rumbled. "See here—I want you to do something for me." He looked around cautiously, as if afraid of an eavesdropper.

"I want you to carry on a little investigation. Those *Starfish* survivors don't know you. They'll be turned in as patients, and it should be easy for you stand a few ward watches. Ask them some questions. Ask about the confounded feuds that seemed to bedevil that ship. And about that mysterious smell McQuaid kept raving about."

"I'll do what you suggest," the girl said disconsolately. "But I don't imagine it will accomplish much; they'll probably tell me what we've already heard. They'll say Lieutenant McQuaid thought he smelled liquor on Dad's breath and doubted that he was in shape to command."

"What if they do?" the admiral retorted. "Don't stop there. It could have been a dozen other things. Smells are important in a submarine. The batteries—gas from the batteries.

"Water came in with a rush, apparently; but there might have been water from below, earlier, and not immediately noticed. It might have got in the batteries and caused a chlorine smell, which McQuaid would have recognized at once.

"Hell's bells! Why didn't I think of that before? Chlorine gas gets a man pretty fast. Water in the batteries—the electrical system short-circuiting—an explosion would be certain to follow."

He reached for the logbook again, and made an entry. He skimmed back a couple of pages, and asked abruptly: "What do you think of Victor Melhorne?"

"I don't like him," Evelyn said. "But he appears to be an honest sort, aboveboard and frank. He accused Vince, today, of mishandling the investigation."

"Yes, I know," the admiral muttered. He lay back, his eyes half-closed, as if thinking deeply. He was strange, Evelyn thought—and priceless. Apparently he had sources of information so well organized that nothing escaped him. And he had the time to lie here and weigh one fact against another.

"We've been too much on the defensive, girl!" he rumbled suddenly. "That's no good. In war or anything else, offense is the best defense. What is it Mahan said? 'The enemy must not be fended off, but smitten down . . . till down he must be struck incessantly and remorselessly.'

"That's what we've got to do. Trap this murderer. Get him under our guns!"

Evelyn could not suppress a smile. She said, "That would be the proper tactics, Admiral, if we only had a faint knowledge of what he looks like; if we weren't misled by a dozen false clues that lead nowhere."

The admiral chuckled. "It happens," he said quietly, "that I know who the murderer is. Knowing it and proving it are two different matters. It will require a little time."

VINCE Ayres came with the glad word that a motor sailer was coming alongside with the first eight men

to be brought up from the *Starfish*. Evelyn hurried topside with him, and they stood near the gangway as the launch approached the big white ship.

She saw the pigboat sailors, blankets wrapped around their shoulders, sitting on the thwarts; the sullen gray sea tossed the boat as if in a final resentment at having been cheated.

Half the crew of the *Consolation* were here at the rail to cheer the men from the bottom, but the sight of those upturned faces, bearded and drawn and still filled now with a great and simple happiness, brought a catch to the girl's throat.

She saw Kowalski's curly head bent over the rail. He yelled down excitedly: "Hey, Salty! Salty Adams, you old son-of-a-gun!" And he made a swipe, unashamed, at a moisture in his eyes.

A redheaded man in water-soaked dungarees looked up at the *Consolation*. He was carrying a heavy three-inch cartridge case that had been partly converted into an ornate lamp stand—the same souvenir to which he had clung in that cold and crowded forward torpedo room. Salty Adams had lost all his clothing except the dungarees he wore, but clothes didn't count. He'd put in a lot of spare time work on this souvenir.

"What d'ye say, Skee?" he chortled. Then, in sudden realization: "Hey, what the hell are you doing here? I thought they made a speed run to the hospital with you guys!"

"They did," Kowalski answered. "But they shanghaied us to sea again. The skipper's aboard, too, Salty. Did you see Mike Way?"

Adams grinned as he came up the gangway, scorning the assistance offered by hospital corpsmen. "Sure!" he said. "He was in the iron doctor, but I had a look at him through the port. If it hadn't been for old Iron Man, we'd still be on the bottom!"

"Has he got bends?" Kowalski asked in concern.

"Yeah—some. Not bad, they told us. Where'll I find Dr. Ayres? Mike gave me a note for him."

VINCE stepped forward and took the submarine sailor's arm. Salty Adams paused for his salute to the quarterdeck; it was given in a way that made everybody know that the first class torpedoman would make another full crash dive in another submarine tomorrow, if the Navy said the word.

"I'm Ayres," Vince said. Evelyn Brill was remembering that these men from the bottom had heard nothing of the two murders, nothing of young Jim Thorpe's disappearance. Time had stopped, for a little while, as far as they were concerned.

Adams shifted the brass cartridge case to the crook of his left arm, and searched his pockets. "He didn't have much time to write it, sir," he said as he produced the folded paper. "He had to send it out through the airlock. I saw the pressure gauge; they had the chief under eighty pounds. But he wrote this and told 'em to tell me it was important."

"Thank you," Vince said.

The blanketed men were hustled into a ward. Vince passed the note to Evelyn. It was brief:

Found something that looks important but will have to dive again to make sure. Next trip of the bell I will have somebody bring up that bottle.

MIKE WAY, CTM.

There was work to do, and Evelyn would have no chance to ask questions until later. The men were given hot drinks and were further warmed and stimulated by the application of hot water bottles and electric pads.

When the rescue bell brought up the second group of eight an hour and a half later, the first men had fallen fast asleep.

The big chamber took the remaining nine out of the *Starfish* on its final trip. Lieutenant James, the small, imperturbable executive officer who would have looked dapper under other circumstances, was the last man to climb out of the torpedo room. When he reached the hospital ship, his first inquiry was for the man who should have had the honor of leaving the *Starfish* last: his skipper.

"He was a sick man," James said when Vince Ayres assured him that Everett Brill was well. "If he'd stayed down there, it might have killed him." He smiled, remembering the circumstances of Brill's leaving. "Did he say anything about it—about being shanghaied out of there, I mean?"

Vince nodded. "He was pretty sore about it. Said somebody hit him in the dark."

And for the first time, the doctor wondered if that blow in the darkness had missed its real purpose. Was the murderer intending to start his work down there in the submarine?

"Somebody did," James grunted. "How's McQuaid?"

"He—he didn't come back to sea," Vince answered. It would be time enough later for Lieutenant James to learn that McQuaid had been murdered, and that Everett Brill might soon face a court martial that would be as unwelcome to him as death itself.

Working, that afternoon, Evelyn Brill kept wondering at what Admiral Wetherbee had said. *It happens that I know who the murderer is.*

There was a possibility that the old sea dog had seen and heard more, on the rainy midnight when McQuaid was killed, than he had ever revealed to anybody. It might, she thought, be set down in that logbook he kept so faithfully.

*

You can't fool around with the decompression table, which is based on physical laws. And the bends are unpredictable: pressure undergone today may double a diver in agony the day after tomorrow if all the nitrogen has not escaped from his blood.

Mike Way had been down at that forty fathom depth beyond the safe time limit; he spent an hour at various ten-foot levels ranging from the hundred-foot depth upward, and he had more than two hours in the recompression chamber aboard the *Algonquin*.

His head cleared slowly. What he had found down there on the *Starfish* seemed improbable, now, like a dream. But if it were true, many things might be at least partly explained—even murder.

"I got to dive again!" the big chief torpedoman kept telling himself. "I got to go into that after escape hatch. Before they hang the skipper for something he didn't do."

But the doctor aboard the salvage tug said no. It was with great difficulty that Mike Way convinced the medical officer that he was all right again; that he could go back to the *Consolation* and report to Vince Ayres.

CHAPTER XVIII

BARBARA WAS LEFT

MELHORNE and Bedell returned to the hospital ship just before dark; and when Vince Ayres reconvened the murder investigation in the little isolation ward just after supper, he heard the two men and Martin West

deep in a discussion of salvage methods. There was a good chance, it seemed, that the Navy would temporarily leave the problem of raising the ship to the Westco firm.

This cheered Martin West. "If they do that," he said happily, "it indicates that the Government has every confidence in our design and construction. If they thought the ship had failed, they'd want to get it up for a quick and thorough examination."

Foster Bedell shook his head dubiously. "I'm not so sure about that, Mr. West," he said. "Divers can enter the flooded portion of the *Starfish,* and make a pretty fair examination of her as she lies. I mean to say that we shouldn't delay, because of any fears of our own that something *might* have gone wrong because of weakness. We've got to show a willingness to coöperate. How long will it take to get the necessary pontoons out here?"

Melhorne said, "About three days. They tow slowly."

Barbara West came in, smiling at the man to whom she was secretly engaged. Watching her, Vince Ayres wondered why the secrecy had been attached to their betrothal. He supposed, charitably, that publicity linked to the submarine tragedy—and, later, to the murders—would have smacked of notoriety.

He called on Bedell, first, but before they had gone into the nurse's office a hospital corpsman came with excerpts copied from Admiral Wetherbee's log. Vince called the group to attention, and read the entries:

1310 Eight men rescued from USS STARFISH brought aboard pursuant to orders of Commandant Nineteenth Naval for hospitalization of all STARFISH survivors.

1320 Resumed study of STARFISH log. . . .

NOTE: Identification of the murderer is possible at this point, through a mathematical process no more difficult than a navigational problem. Identity, however, must be kept secret for the time being in order to determine whether or not guilty person had accomplices.

Conclude from observations that two persons who have been under scrutiny and questioning are attempting to shield each other. Could this mean one is an accomplice, or does each fear other is guilty? Must consider motives here, and reasons for this fear.

CARDONI murder committed in a clever but lubberly fashion. Purpose of it was to cover up, but in killing CARDONI the murderer has provided an excellent clue: murderer would have been safer if CARDONI were still alive.

1450 Second contingent of STARFISH survivors brought aboard. Must talk to them when they are able to be questioned.

1520 Pursuant to radio orders received from commandant Nineteenth Naval District, began to prepare personal log, with final summations of case, for presentation to board of inquiry scheduled to be called ashore immediately upon return of USS CONSOLATION to port. . . .

1530 What did WAY, MICHAEL, CTM USN discover on topside of STARFISH which he considers pertinent to this investigation? WAY deserves commendation for bravery exhibited in perilous dive. . . . MEMO TO LIEUT. AYRES: Please carry on.

THERE was a silence when Vince Ayres had finished reading the log entry. A dubious silence, for the most part, he saw when he noted the expressions worn by those who had heard. He folded the paper into his pocket, and polished his gold-rimmed glasses before he spoke.

"It would be a great mistake—a fatal mistake, so far as the murderer is concerned—to underestimate the importance or the accuracy of Admiral Wetherbee's log," he said quietly. "But we will proceed as he suggests. Will you come in, Mr. Bedell?"

The dark-faced man nodded "Certainly," and followed Evelyn into the nurse's office. He was more at ease than most of those Vince had previously questioned, but he had less to tell. He had heard nothing at the hospital on the night McQuaid was killed. Yes, he had seen Everett Brill in the passageway a few doors from Cardoni's room.

"But I attached no significance to it," he said with a reassuring glance toward Evelyn. "In fact, I can't quite understand why the captain should have been placed in custody at all."

Vince toyed with a clinical thermometer, pencil-wise. "Mr. West has a different opinion," he said. "He thinks Brill is the most likely suspect because he firmly believes some negligence on the captain's part was responsible for the *Starfish* disaster. You have noticed, of course, that the two murders and Thorpe's disappearance preclude an possibility of discovering what happened in the after portion of the submarine until she is raised?"

"Why, yes," Bedell said. He pulled his dark brows together, in that intent way, and hesitated. "I don't wish to appear disloyal to Mr. West, doctor. But I don't share his belief. I was in the control room most of the time preceding that full crash dive, and I'm sure the captain handled his ship quite properly. I don't think he had anything to cover up, but murder or otherwise."

"Then the loss of the ship—" Vince began.

"Who can say?" Bedell asked. He pursed his lips and resumed slowly: "Submarines are tricky. Something went wrong. Watertight integrity failed at some vital point. That's my honest belief."

VINCE regarded the designer thoughtfully and with full appreciation of what Bedell was saying. If the Navy thought as Bedell did, Westco would likely lose the contract for construction of those remaining submarines.

"You don't think the *Starfish* struck anything—any submerged object?" the doctor asked.

"I don't think so," Bedell said. "The sea was quite rough, and there was considerable noise in the ship. But we would have felt any jar sufficient to rip the hull."

"Well," Vince pursued, "your theory eliminates one of the strongest possible murder motives. Now what do you believe *was* the motive, and who is the murderer?"

"I think there may be some truth in what Vic Melhorne said—about Thorpe," Bedell declared. "His first sleepwalking—if it really was sleepwalking—could have been purely coincidental. But when a thing happens too often, it ceases to be coincidence. I think Cardoni's murder and Thorpe's apparent suicide proved the entire case.

"As for a motive"—and Foster Bedell shrugged—"there doesn't appear to have been any beyond that of revenge against Lieutenant McQuaid for a fancied wrong, and a subsequently growing psychosis—something you'd understand better than I.

"Perhaps Cardoni teased the boy. Or perhaps something Cardoni said led Thorpe to believe Cardoni knew too much."

AFTER Bedell had gone, the doctor smiled at Evelyn. "There," he said, "was an unexpected champion for your father. I imagined these four civilians would stick together closer than brothers, especially since they're responsible for the building of the submarine. It's surprising that Bedell would admit the ship might have been at fault."

"It's refreshing," Evelyn said. "At least, Mr. Bedell is honest, and I'm very grateful to him. Vince—whom did the admiral mean when he said at least two persons were trying to protect each other? Barbara West and Melhorne?"

"Of course," Vince told her. "We've seen it. Miss West stalled and then finally admitted she was on the balcony, and that she fled when she saw the man with the club. We're pretty certain that she fears that man was Melhorne. Why—I mean how she justifies this fear

by way of a motive that would lead Melhorne to kill McQuaid—I don't know.

"But, for the same unknown reason, Melhorne may be nursing a secret fear that Barbara committed the murder. He knows, no doubt, that she was out there that night. What that mutual suspicion is based on, we must try to find out."

He called Melhorne into the office. The pale-eyed man was coldly polite, and as frank as he had been earlier in the day. In his thin voice, he repeated his assertion that John Thorpe should have been arrested.

"Let's get back to the night at the hospital," Vince said abruptly. "Did you hear anybody at your window?"

Melhorne hesitated perceptibly. "Why, no, I didn't."

"Would you say you slept so soundly that a man—the murderer, Mr. Melhorne—could have come through your room from the hall?"

"I wouldn't know how soundly I slept," Melhorne said angrily. "You'll agree that I had reason to sleep hard. I was tired."

"You wouldn't even have heard Miss West calling you from the open window?"

Melhorne sprang to hie feet, flushing. "What are you getting at, doctor?"

"The fact that she has told me she was out there, and that you must have known it. She has told you, too, before now. Are you attempting to protect her from anything definite, Melhorne? Are you afraid she might be accused?"

The stocky man bit his lip. "I resent this line of questioning, doctor!" he protested. "It's absurd to hint, in the slightest degree, that Miss West could have had anything to do with either murder. You had your man, and you let him get away. You're trying to cover up, now, by—"

A scream came from the ward.

THOSE in the nurse's office whirled, startled by the cry, and Vince Ayres saw that it had been the mouse-like Miss Wilkins who uttered it. She was pointing toward the door, still greatly excited.

Vince ran out into the ward. All he could see was a messenger from the radio room, closing the door behind him as he brought a yellow communications sheet.

Miss Wilkins recovered speech. "Thorpe!" she cried in a strained, high-pitched voice. "He went by the door! He—he looked like a ghost."

"Ridiculous!" Vince said. But he went quickly to the door and opened it. The passageway was deserted.

"I saw him, doctor," the nurse insisted. "I'm not superstitious, of course. It really was Thorpe. But he was very pale, and he wore a white sheet."

Foster Bedell smiled. "We'll all be seeing things before long, I'm afraid."

Vince turned to the messenger. "Did you see anybody in the passageway?"

"No, sir," the round-eyed sailor said. "I didn't look behind me, but I'd have heard them, I'm sure. Will—will you sign for this radio, sir? And Way, the chief torpedoman, has been turned in at his room, Dr. Ayres, and he asked me to tell you that he'd like to see you on a matter of great importance."

Vince signed and glanced hurriedly through the message. He said, as if preoccupied by its contents, "I think that will be all for tonight. Messenger, tell the chief I'll come to his room in five minutes. Well . . . let's not start seeing ghosts, please! Good night."

Evelyn Brill remained at a signal from him, the pad of temperature charts still in her hand. She said: "I'll have to do quite a bit of typing to transcribe this record up to date. Anything of importance from ashore, Vince?"

"Important?" he exclaimed. "I should say so! Read it!"

RADIO NINETEENTH NAVAL TWELFTH BT LIEUT. VINCENT AYRES USS CONSOLATION BT BARBARA WEST PHOTO IN SUNDAY SOCIETY SECTION NEARLY TWO YEARS AGO OCCASION ANNOUNCEMENT HER ENGAGEMENT TO FREDERICK MCQUAID WHO WAS THEN ENSIGN. NO OTHER CLIPPINGS. HAVE ASKED QUESTIONS MCQUAIDS FRIENDS. THEY SAY HE NOT THE GIRL BROKE ENGAGEMENT AND THAT SHE MADE QUITE A SCENE. APPEARS MARTIN WEST ONCE POOR SHIPYARD WORKER AND HIS WIFE BECAME SOCIAL CLIMBER AFTER HE GOT RICH. WIFE NOW DEAD. WANTED DAUGHTER TO MARRY NAVAL OFFICER. CHECK WESTCO FINANCIAL STANDING TOMORROW BT SIMMONS TOD 2120

Evelyn drew a long breath and stared thoughtfully at the door where Barbara West had gone with her father and the others. She said, "I'm afraid that doesn't help, Vince. That was two years ago."

"But Barbara West isn't the girl to toss a jilting over her shoulder and forget it," Vince replied. "Why, this is the reason we needed for that mutual concern—or call it distrust, if you like—between Barbara and Melhorne.

"He knows, of course, that McQuaid left her at the church, and he knows that she's wilful and headstrong and spoiled. And *she* knows that Melhorne must have resented the re-entry of McQuaid into her life, even if it came about in a chance manner through the loss of the *Starfish*."

He read the message again. Then he said, "Evelyn, would you mind taking this to the admiral? I think he ought to see it right away, and I want to jump up to Mike Way's room and find out what he learned that he thinks is so important."

CHAPTER XIX

MURDER'S FIRST MISS

MIKE Way enjoyed luxury scarcely consistent with his rating of chief torpedoman. It was a far cry from the crowded quarters of a submarine, or the almost equally-jammed space of the "guinea pullman" aboard a destroyer, to the quiet room in which the big, ugly diver had been placed aboard the *Consolation*.

This had been a first-class cabin in the days before the Navy converted the ship from a passenger liner; it was above the main deck, well lighted and well ventilated by portholes opening on the promenade.

He grinned from his bunk as Vince Ares entered. The doctor said, "Hello, Chief," and looked sharply at a crimson splotch on the diver's forehead.

That was blood, oozing from broken capillaries. Pressure, finding its way out of Mike Way's rugged body. He'd been under too long at that extreme depth where the *Starfish* lay.

"Doctor," the chief said, "they told me about Cardoni. And John Thorpe. Do you think somebody pushed that kid? Or do you figure it was suicide . . . because he did the killings?"

Vince said, "I've about given up trying to figure all these angles. And I'm not even sure that Thorpe *has* gone over the side. Miss Wilkins swears she saw him go by the door of the isolation ward, a little while ago."

"But, good Lord, doctor, a man can't hide out aboard ship! Not for long. They told me they looked everywhere for him."

"Not without help, he couldn't hide out," Vince said. "I don't know. I saw an entry in the admiral's log which might mean something, but I didn't ask any questions. It said 'Informed instructions carried out concerning Thorpe . . .' But I came here to hear you tell me something important, not to speculate on things. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Just fine, sir. I've got to dive again. They shouldn't have sent me back over here. I've got to be the first diver inside that flooded portion of the *Starfish.*"

"You look fine!" Vince said sarcastically. "How long were you down?"

"About forty-five minutes, sir."

"Or nearly three times as long as is advisable at that depth," said the doctor. He wiped his gold-rimmed glasses and gave Mike Way one of those quiet, clear-eyed looks. "You did a great job, Chief," he added softly. "Those twenty-five men probably owe you their lives."

"Oh, somebody would have got that cable secured, if I hadn't." Mike winced suddenly, and cautiously lifted one muscular arm. It was swollen around the elbow.

"YOU'VE got the bends right now," Ayres exclaimed. "You'd better jump into a tub of boiling hot water. I'll have a couple of corpsmen get it ready."

"Not now, sir," pleaded Mike Way. "This is only a slight attack. I've had 'em bad, before. Doctor, maybe I found something, and maybe I didn't. It's crazy; it doesn't belong! But if the murders have anything to do with the sinking of that pigboat . . ."

His voice was rising, excitedly. It trailed off on a question, and Vince Ayres pulled his chair closer and leaned toward the man in the bunk.

"Go on," he said. "We don't know, yet. I just got information from shore that would make it look as if there might be a different motive, entirely. But after all, the men who have been put out of the way were the men who escaped from the flooded compartments of the *Starfish,* and that looks significant. Go on!"

Mike Way winced again under a spasm of pain that struck somewhere in his nitrogen-saturated body. He said, between his teeth:

"When I was working my way past the conning tower, my lines caught on something. I looked up; I could see about thirty feet pretty well. You know those vents in the skin of the ship, the ones that take in air when she's on the surface? Well, one of them—"

"Look out!" yelled Vince Ayres. He leaped, spinning his chair around and sending it crashing against Mike Way's bunk. He slapped at the light switch by the door, and the room went dark.

There was a faint shadow across the porthole where Vince had heard a scraping sound, and where his quick eyes caught a glint of steel against the brightwork. And then gun flame laid its split-second brilliance in the room, and the noise was loud in his ears.

TWO shots—three shots! Vince heard the flattening drive of slugs against the bulkhead; heard them ricochet somewhere in the room. He dived toward the porthole, risking a bullet to grab at that gun, and—what was more important—to seize the hand that held it. But he was too late.

There was comparative silence again, and the acrid smell of powder drifted through the darkened room. He heard shoes click swiftly on the deck. The assassin was running aft.

Vince cursed, and hit the light switch again, afraid of what he would see. He yelled, "Are you hurt, Chief?" before his eyes could adjust themselves to the returned light, and he waited at the doorway for Mike's slow answer.

People were coming up excitedly outside. It came to Vince that before he could reach the promenade deck, the person who had fired those shots would have had his choice of ducking into a dozen different places—

"No, sir," said Mike Way with laborious, pain-locked effort. "Wasn't hit. Just—bends. They're bad—now!"

The door flew open. A pharmacist's mate burst in excitedly. Kowalski was at his heels; Kowalski's face was nearly as drab as the adhesive tape that covered that cut he'd suffered on the *Starfish.* Then came Foster Bedell, and Evelyn Brill; Martin West and Melhorne and others jammed the doorway.

Vince seized Evelyn's arm. "Take charge here," he told her. "One of you men get a doctor. He wasn't hit, but he's got the bends—got them bad!"

He saw her nod with quick understanding, and he went on amidships where a door opened on the promenade deck, knowing heavily that his search would be futile. There was nobody on the dimly-lighted deck; there was nothing in sight to give a clue to the identity of the person who had feared what Mike Way was going to say.

Vince came to the open porthole through which the gun had been thrust. He heard Foster Bedell's voice inside, saying: "Didn't you see him, Way? Did you get a glimpse of his face?" And instead of answering, Mike Way wrenched a groan between his set teeth, and the sound almost became a scream.

Vince Ayres knew what the bends could do. If they were bad enough, the big diver might lose consciousness. The bends could twist a man's stomach in a knot and set fire to it. Nothing that could happen to a man quite compared with this agony.

He swore again, and turned away. But he remembered something. The waterway that ran like a gutter along the deck beneath the rail to drain rain or high-lashing seas. He struck a match and cupped the flame in his palm against the wind, and he found what he was looking for: an empty shell.

There was only one. Thirty-two caliber automatic.

At least he knew what kind of a gun to look for. A gun the Navy didn't use, he told himself. A gun small enough for a woman to carry.

THEY were carrying Mike Way out in a Stoke's basket litter when Vince came back to the pasageway, and Vince knew that the attack was too severe to be remedied by immersion in bath water that was nearly scalding. He overtook the doctor Evelyn had summoned: a sturdy young junior grade attached to the *Consolation's* so far skeleton staff.

"He's got to be put under compression again, Dr. Ayres," the stripe-and-a-half officer reported. "I gave him an injection, and called away the officers' motor boat to get him over to the *Algonquin* quickly. We have no recompression tank aboard yet."

Vince nodded, and heard the sputter of the motor boat as it came around the lee of the ship to make the accommodation ladder. The stretcher bearers went down to the main deck, and Mike Way's cries drifted up through the ship.

Evelyn Brill's gray eyes were wet. She said, "It takes something to make that man cry out. I know. He was my patient once, and he had bends bad enough, then. This time they must be worse. Thank God the murderer missed him. After all he's done for his shipmates—and for Dad!"

"He'll be all right, Evelyn," Vince said gently. "They don't call him Iron Man for nothing; he was under pres-

sure enough to kill the average man. They'll feed him oxygen in the tank, and he'll be all right by morning. Let's look in this room."

They found white lead chipped from the bulkhead in two places inches from where Mike Way's head had been. The third shot had struck the mattress itself.

Captain McKee loomed in the doorway, tall and commanding, and now very grim. He listened silently to Vince's report, and examined the shell Vince had found.

"I'll have this ship searched from double bottoms to crow's nest," he said. "But it would have been an easy matter for the man who fired those shots to throw the gun over the side.

"See here, Dr. Ayres, you're in charge of this investigation and your party came aboard somewhat as an independent command. I was told to give you free rein and to coöperate with you as much as possible. But, damn it all, something's got to be done—at once!"

Vince stiffened. "Captain, I think we're beginning to get somewhere. I—"

"Get somewhere?" McKee echoed. "With a murder a day and a few assorted attempts on the side. I want action! I'll expect solution of these crimes quickly, or I shall have to take steps of my own to protect the security of this ship and the lives of everybody in her."

"May I ask what you'd do?" Vince inquired quietly.

"Lock every member of your party in the brig and in their rooms, separately and individually," McKee snapped. "It's apparent that when Lieutenant Brill was arrested on orders from shore, the wrong man was locked up. It's apparent, now, that young Thorpe was the innocent victim of his own affliction—sleepwalking. The murderer, doctor, is still at large."

He paused, and glared at Vince. "Do I make myself clear, sir?"

"PERFECTLY, Captain," Vince said. "I understand your feelings. But such a precedure would hinder two things, sir. First, the investigation itself. We haven't had much to go on. I've depended a lot on the psychological effect of calling these people together and watching them—studying their reactions. I may say that we've uncovered a couple of good leads in that manner."

"Go on," McKee said grimly.

"Then there are the salvage operations, sir. Melhorne and Bedell have active charge of the work done by the civilian crew on the *Westsal*. They went aboard her today and are scheduled to do the same tomorrow. I question whether it's advisable to do anything that might delay or jeopardize the raising of the *Starfish*, Captain. We may not solve these crimes until we learn what actually happened aboard that submarine."

Captain McKee looked up significantly. "You mean—"

"I mean that there is a possibility that these murders were an attempt to cover up the murders of twenty-two other men, sir."

The gray-haired four-striper clicked his jaw shut. "Very well, Dr. Ayres," he said briskly. "I'll give you twenty-four hours. If there's been no action by that time, I shall report to the commandant of Nineteenth Naval and ask that I be given full charge."

"Aye, aye, sir," Vince said, and watched Captain McKee stalk away looking far more military than any other medical officer he had ever known.

Then he turned to Evelyn with a rueful look. "I guess we've failed, all right," he said. "It's funny. Suspicions point to a half dozen people; actual evidence doesn't point to anybody. And I rack my brains all day and study and watch these people—and the only real progress seems to come from that old sea dog back yonder, who does nothing but lie there and think things out. Did you give him that radio from Simmons, Evelyn?"

"Yes. He had Lieutenant James—the executive officer from the *Starfish*—in his room. They were talking about the design of the submarine."

Vince said, "Well, he insists—in his log, anyway—that he knows who the murderer is. All right. He'd better tell us who it is, before another murder is committed. Let's go talk to him."

(To Be Continued Next Week)

Any thrifty, well-groomed tar
Knows Thin Gillettes are best by far
For fast and easy shaves each time—
And yet four blades cost just a dime!

The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

MEN of DARING

by STOOKIE ALLEN

Dr. Rusby

(FROM A PORTRAIT)

BOTANIST

DR. HENRY H. RUSBY BECAME A BOTANIST AT 10, WHEN HIS TEACHER GAVE HIM A BOOK ON PLANTS AND HE BEGAN RANGING THE NEW JERSEY COUNTRYSIDE FOR SPECIMENS.

IN THE 1880'S, SEEKING MEDICINAL PLANTS IN THE SOUTHWEST, HE WAS ROBBED BY BANDITS AND FORCED TO HIDE FROM MARAUDING APACHES.

HE FINANCED HIS MEDICAL STUDIES BY THE SALE OF HIS COLLECTION, THEN WENT TO SOUTH AMERICA FOR COCA LEAVES, SOURCE OF THE NEWLY DISCOVERED COCAINE. LOST A SUPPLY WORTH A FORTUNE IN A REVOLUTION AND RECRUITED A PARTY OF ADVENTURERS FOR A DASH TO THE UPPER AMAZON. STUMBLED OUT WITH 45,000 PLANTS, MANY UNKNOWN, SO RAVAGED BY HARDSHIPS HIS FATHER DID NOT RECOGNIZE HIM.

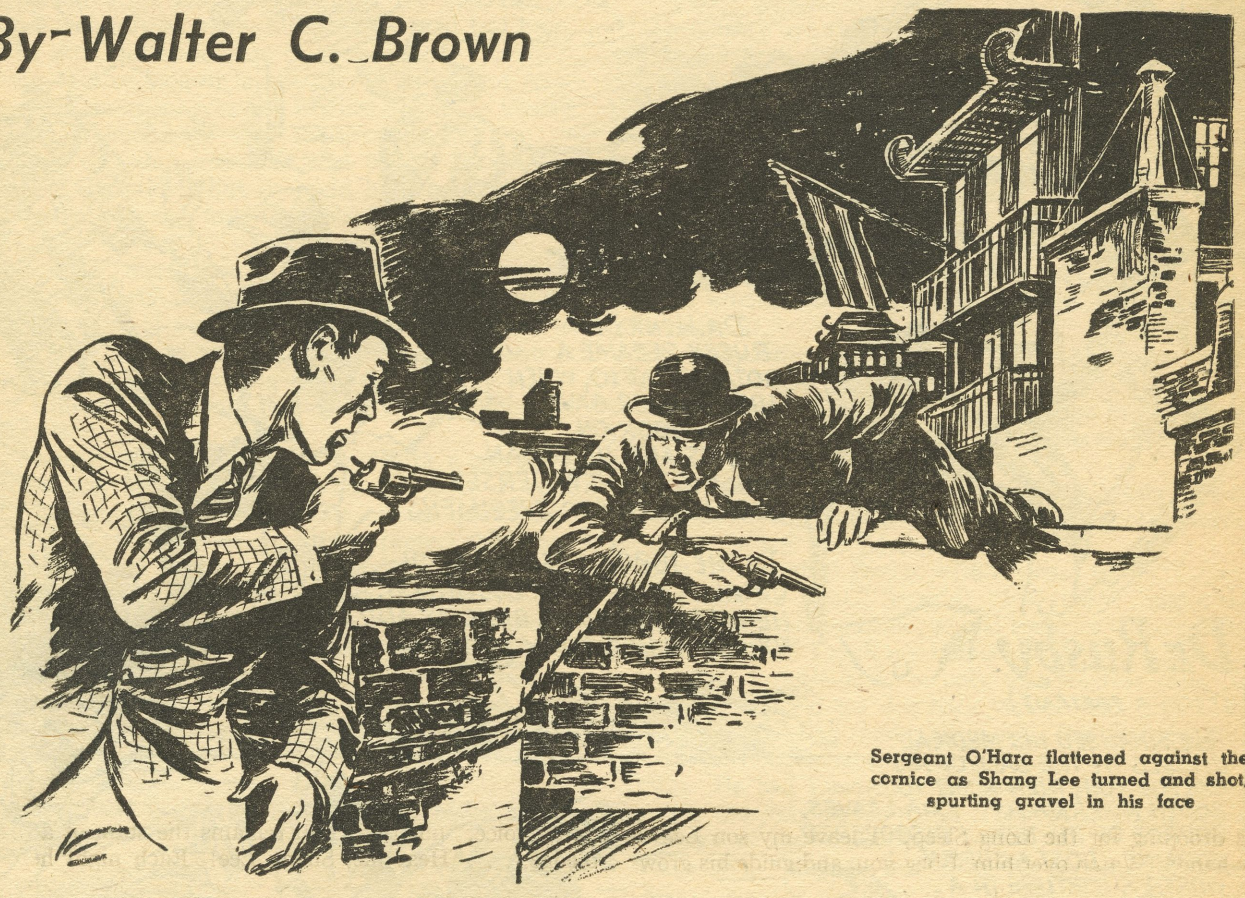
DEAN OF COLUMBIA COLLEGE OF PHARMACY, FIGHTER FOR PURE FOOD AND DRUG LAWS, AT 60 HE LED AN EXPEDITION AFTER THE ROOT PRODUCING CAAPI (THE DRUG THAT ALLAYS FEAR) AND WHICH WAS BELIEVED LOST. AND FOUND IT!

AT 67 HE PLUNGED INTO THE JUNGLES AGAIN. ILL HEALTH FORCED HIM TO LEAVE THE PARTY. ALONE, WITH ONLY A COMPASS, HE TREKKED 1,600 MILES THROUGH THE WILDERNESS TO AN OUTPOST ON THE AMAZON.

DR. RUSBY RECEIVED HONORS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD FOR HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO MEDICINE. HE DIED RECENTLY—AT 85!

The Night-Devil

By Walter C. Brown



Sergeant O'Hara flattened against the cornice as Shang Lee turned and shot, spurting gravel in his face

It is written: honor is a two-edged sword, and the pledged word may cut both ways. Thus it appeared to the House of Shang; and only by Number One wisdom could an old man keep faith with the blue-coat white devils

IT IS a tale that is told in Chinatown: how the honorable Shang Yao was tricked into pledging his sacred word to save the life and liberty of one whom duty demanded he slay and destroy.

And of the strange and desperate deed by which Shang Yao contrived to keep both his plighted word intact and his sacred honor untarnished.

Also, it is a tale spoken in a whisper: for the fate of the night-devil must be kept from the sharp ears of the blue coat men, who cling so stubbornly to the foolish rice-face law which demands a life for a life.

"Has a lump of worthless fieldstone the same value as a carving of *fei-tsui* jade, merely because they are of equal weight?" the slanteyed Orientals argue.

Now part of the blame must rest with Shang Yao's fanatical devotion to the time-worn ways of his ancestors. If he had tried to cure his young nephew's unfortunate passion for fan-tan by some method more modern than the ninety-nine prayers to Milo Fo, then Chinatown might never have heard of the dreaded night-devil, and tragedy would have passed through Half Moon Street without knocking at Shang Yao's door.

And no less fanatical than this ancestral worship was Shang Yao's devotion to the pledged word. His own dealings, upright and honorable, had become a living legend of the yellow quarter, so that any one making a promise "on the word of Shang Yao" was bound as rigidly as by an oath sworn on the spurting blood of a snow-white rooster.

But there was to come a day of evil chance when Shang Yao's iron-clad honor found itself trapped by an implicable tug-of-war between a sacred pledge given to the East, and another, no less sacred, given to the West.

This pledge to the West concerned Sergeant Dennis O'Hara of the Chinatown Squad, who at the risk of his own life had saved Shang Yao from a peculiarly painful death some years before.

IT HAPPENED late one night when three robbers broke into Shang Yao's shop, holding him a bound prisoner while they sought to locate the secret closet in which the wealthy merchant kept the more valuable items of his stock.

Not being able to find this hidden space, they began to question Shang Yao, who refused to yield up his secret, so that presently they began to wrench the nails from his fingers—a classic method of Oriental persuasion.

They were busily pulling out Shang's third fingernail when red-headed Officer O'Hara arrived on the scene.

"Get your hands up, you yellow rats!" O'Hara barked, leveling his service .38 at the marauders.

Now at that time O'Hara was only the rookie of the Chinatown Squad, and without experience of the treacherous methods of the Oriental highbinder. The yellow hands went aloft at his command, but flashing steel came winging through the air and struck him down before he could pull a trigger.

With the red blood pouring from chest and shoulder, O'Hara staggered to his feet, shot down two of the slant-eyed thugs and managed to subdue the third with his bare fists.

So the courageous young blue coat had won his sergeant's stripes—and the gratitude and esteem of Shang Yao, which was no small matter: for the wealthy merchant was also a man of power, being supreme councillor of the Five Tongs.

"Sah-jin," Shang Yao often repeated, holding up his maimed fingers, "while these scars remain, thy deed of courage shall never be forgotten. Should there come to thee an hour of peril, which Tao forbid, speak but a whisper, and all who bear the name of Shang will rally to thy help on the instant."

And these were no empty words, coming from the lips of Shang Yao, but a Number One bond of indebtedness; though neither of them had any inkling that O'Hara's "hour of peril" was set and drawing nearer, nor of the strange manner in which Shang Yao was to redeem his pledge.

NOW Shang Yao's pledge to the East concerned his adopted son, the fan-tan-playing Shang Lee, only child of his deceased brother, who had exacted a Number One promise as he lay on his death-bed.

"Brother Yao," he had whispered, when he felt his eyelids drooping for the Long Sleep, "I leave my son Lee in thy hands. Watch over him, I beg you, and guide his growing steps along the paths of virtue, that he may prove worthy of our honorable ancestors."

"Aye, brother, it shall be done," Shang Yao replied. "Are not you and I of the same blood, bone and flesh? Thy son shall be as my son!"

But Shang Yao found this pledge more and more difficult to carry out as Lee grew from mischievous boyhood to a wild and headstrong youth who aped the manners and dress of the West.

Especially did Shang frown upon the lad's ever-growing appetite for games of chance, so that he was always empty of pocket, and forever whining and coaxing for further sums to fatten his pleasure-purse.

"Thy needs are like a well without bottom," Shang Yao would remark. "Think you that silver pieces are to be picked up from the ground, like dead leaves after an autumn wind?"

But young Lee was a master of the wheedling arts; and in the end Shang Yao always opened his purse, for he had a great store of silver pieces, and but one son to carry on the honored name of Shang.

However, at last there came an hour of reckoning to young Lee's wayward course, when Mark Sin the fat gambler of Paradise Court called upon the esteemed merchant of Half Moon Street.

"With grieving and regret, honored sir," the fat gambler began, "I speak of a certain item of debt standing between thy son Shang Lee and myself. A trifling sum, no doubt, for one as rich as you—but he did promise me payment time and time again, until my patience is worn thin as a beggar's shoes."

"Debt—and a broken pledge!" Shang Yao exclaimed, and his face grew stern as the mask of Yo Fei, the Black One. "Say on, Mark Sin."

Then the moon-faced gambler recounted the details of young Lee's fan-tan debts, and produced a sheaf of painted slips to support his claims. Whereupon the merchant struck a table-gong so loudly that the shivering sound boomed through the house like thunder.

"Wing Tow," he snapped to the *mafoo* who came running at the unusual summons, "bid Shang Lee to this room—and instantly!"

So the young fan-tan player came down the stairs in his usual white devil attire: loud check suit and colored shirt, shoes of shining leather and gaudy tie. But his face tightened into sullenness when he saw Mark Sin sitting there like a bloated Buddha.

"My son," Shang Yao said sternly, "Mark Sin has wounded my ears with a sorrowful tale of pledges made and broken by one bearing the name of Shang."

"Believe him not!" young Lee cried hastily. "Mark Sin is a cheat, a trickster! As we sat at play he did give me *samshu* to drink, so that a buzzing and roaring came into my head, and I knew not what I was doing."

"My son, there is not one, but many debt papers here," Shang Yao replied, spreading the painted slips fan-wise. "It has been said that no man is too wise to be caught once in a snare, but only a witless fool falls into the same pitfall again and again."

Then the merchant turned to the fat gambler. "You shall have your money, Mark Sin, and at once. The House of Shang has never failed to pay a just debt."

YOUNG Lee shuffled his feet uneasily as Shang Yao counted out the money in a silence hushed and grim, and the merchant's lean yellow hand trembled with anger as he pushed the heap of bills across the counter.

"Now my son's money-debt is paid," he declared in a harsh voice, "but there still remains the stain of a broken pledge. . . . Hear me, Shang Lee! Each night hereafter thou shalt retire to thy room and copy out one of the prayers to Mio Fo. In completing this task, mayhap thou wilt have learned more of wisdom."

Young Lee's face clouded and his hands clenched at these words; for there are nine-and-ninety prayers to Milo Fo, and none of them shorter than a man might set down with brush and ink-pot between the hours of twilight and high moon.

He saw his precious night-hours of gaming and carousing cut off for the space of ninety-nine days by this hateful punishment—but he also saw the masklike set of Shang Yao's stern face, and knew this was no time for whining or wheedling.

"Thy unworthy son hears and obeys," Lee replied hastily, and made the three-time kowtow of departure under orders. But as he turned away, the jet-black glitter of his glance at Mark Sin was like a promise of the death-by-a-thousand-cuts.

For young Lee despised the ancestral modes and manners to which Shang Yao clung so rigidly—the wearing of *shaam* and skull-cap and felt-soled slippers; the burning of paper prayers; the sleeping on a hard bamboo *k'ang*.

And he had only a sneer for devil-screens and *feng-shui* charts and the stone *foo* dogs which guarded every doorway.

"Milo Fo!" he muttered angrily. "*Wang pu tau!* When I am lord of the house, I will make short work of these foolish elder gods!"

So young Lee's footsteps made an angry stamping as he mounted toward his quarters, and in the upper hall he spat contemptuously into the snarling jowls of the three-foot *foo* dog whose duty it was to keep evil spirits at bay.

Then he stopped in his tracks, staring thoughtfully at the stone beast; for a startling idea had burst upon him. Wrapped in deep abstraction, Shang Lee drew a white devil

cigarette from a silver case, flicked a little metal tube which spurted flame, and puffed out a cloud of pearl-gray smoke.

"Hai!" he exclaimed softly, smiling a crooked little smile as he set about writing down the first prayer to Milo Fo.

IN THE shop below-stairs, Shang Yao made a polite gesture as Mark Sin rose to depart. "Rest thyself a bit," he urged. "Now that our business is at an end, we will speak of more pleasant things over a taste of rice and a sip of wine."

So Wing Tow the *mafoo* brought in a stone bottle of famous Sing-an wine, made from the red rice of Shensi, and dishes of pickled ginger and sugared melon seeds.

"Fat to thy bones, and long life to the fat," Mark Sin toasted, lifting his porcelain cup.

"May your shadow never grow less," Shang responded courteously.

So they sat talking of one thing and another, until darkness came and the lamps of Chinatown burst through the gathering night like great yellow lilies.

"Thy hospitality has been worthy of a white-button mandarin," Mark Sin declared in parting.

"Thy gracious words are a fragrance to the nostrils of my honored ancestors," Shang Yao replied, bowing.

Now this Mark Sin was also one who held to the old-fashioned manner of dress, and since pockets do not exist in the tight-legged Oriental trousers and loose-fitting *shaam,* he followed the usual Chinatown custom of folding the sheaf of bills which had cleared Shang Lee's debt and tucking them inside the band of his round black hat.

Then the fat gambler waddled off through Half Moon Street and crossed Mulberry Lane on his way to the fan-tan lair in Paradise Court. But as he passed through the dark and unlighted alley which leads to that mysterious Court, a hand reached out from the darkness and snatched the black hat from his head.

"Hai! Hai!" Mark Sin shouted, clawing at the darkness in a frantic effort to clutch and grapple with the unseen thief; but he only succeeded in colliding with a wall and scratching his face and hands on the rough bricks.

In response to his howling cries windows rattled up and doors banged open, but the silent-footed yellow shadows who came gliding across the Court kept a wary distance until someone came running with an oil lantern, and they saw that the man of noise was Mark Sin.

"Thief! Thief!" the gambler shouted. "A thief has stolen my money-hat!"

"Here is thy hat!" the man with the lantern announced, flashing his light over the nearby ground.

Mark Sin swooped down upon the black hat, his fat fingers groping over the inside band. Empty! His money had been stolen!

"Ai-yee!" the gambler groaned, then turned and made a sudden bull-like charge through the ring of spectators, his fat legs pounding back along the alley to Mulberry Lane and thence into Half Moon Street, where he arrived, puffing and spent, at Shang Yao's shop.

"Shang Yao, thy son is a thief in the night!" he panted, leveling a quivering finger at the astonished merchant. "He did follow at my heels to Paradise Court, and snatched back the money of his debt!"

"HAVE care of thy words, Mark Sin," Shang Yao warned. "My son has not set foot across this threshold since your departure. Even now he is shut up in his room, busy at the task I set for him."

"By Tao, I tell you he is not within this house!" the gambler shouted. "Let us go at once to his room, so that his trickery will stand proven. I say he is a thief."

"Look you, Mark Sin, I have spoken on this matter," the merchant replied with growing wrath. "I tell you my son has not even set his foot upon the staircase. Is the pledged word of Shang Yao to be brushed aside like the oath of a drunken coolie?"

"And I give you the pledged word of Mark Sin that thy son is a thief!" the gambler cried out, carried away by fury and chagrin. "Stand aside! It is my money which has been stolen. I shall look into this matter with my own eyes."

And he pushed Shang Yao from his path in his determination to reach the staircase.

"Am I not master in my own house?" the merchant demanded with blazing eyes, and clapped his hands to summon the *mafoo.* "Wing Tow, remove this objectionable person from my sight with all possible haste."

Whereupon the faithful *mafoo* laid hold of the fat gambler and thrust him through the doorway into Half Moon Street with scant ceremony, banging shut the door after him, and dropping the wooden bolt.

Screeching with rage at this indignity to his person, Mark Sin hurled himself against the locked door, pounding it with his fists, kicking the panels, and making such a furious outcry that the gathering crowd soon overflowed the pavement before the shop.

Then Sergeant O'Hara arrived on the scene, cleaving a path with broad shoulders and booming voice.

"What goes on here?" O'Hara demanded. "What's all this racket?"

Mark Sin began to pour out his angry story, shaking his clenched fists to the witnessing heavens, and waving the black hat under O'Hara's nose.

As he finished, Shang Yao came out on the shop steps to enter denial, and their singsong dueling snapped back and forth like strings of Canton firecrackers on the Day of *Ji Toy.*

O'Hara listened patiently, probing with a shrewd question now and again, for the sergeant was well versed in the devious ways of the yellow man.

"Well, Mark Sin," he said, "I don't see that you've got a case against Shang Lee. You didn't see the thief's face; you didn't even hear his voice. And when Shang Yao gives his pledged word the boy wasn't outside the house, that ought to settle it."

"If Shang Lee is within, why is he kept hidden from my sight?" Mark Sin persisted. "A spoken word may be true or false, but the seeing eye is not to be cheated."

At these words the merchant made an angry gesture. "Sah-jin, I will not have a shadow cast upon the word of Shang Yao. Go within the house thyself and look into Shang Lee's chamber, which is on the topmost floor. Then tell this fatted pig whether my son be there or not."

"All right, Shang Yao, that's fair enough," O'Hara said, and climbed the stairs. Young Lee was seated before a thick-leaved book, with paper and brushes and ink-pots spread before him.

"Sah-jin!" he greeted, rising politely.

"DIDN'T you hear the racket downstairs?" O'Hara asked. "Mark Sin was held up and robbed of his money after he left here."

"Wah!" young Lee replied. "My ears rejoice at the news."

"Mark Sin seems to think that *you* pulled off the job," O'Hara added dryly.

Young Lee gave a scornful laugh, holding up strips of rice-paper covered with vertical columns of broken stick writing.

"Has not my august parent told you of the tedious task he set me? I am commanded to write out the nine-and-

ninety prayers to Milo Fo. It is long labor for me."

"Well, it's a lucky alibi for you," O'Hara said. "Mark Sin is ready to swear you're the man who stuck him up in Paradise Court."

Shang Lee shrugged. "Have I the magic arts of a *shaman,* that I can be in two places at the same time?"

So Sergeant O'Hara went downstairs again and made his report. But still Mark Sin was not satisfied.

"Mayhap Shang Yao himself had a hand in plotting this deed!" he cried out. "There is great profit to be made if one pays a debt with one hand, and snatches back the money with the other."

Whereupon Sergeant O'Hara jerked the fat gambler around so suddenly his head bobbed like a cork. "Listen, you moon-faced crook!" the sergeant snapped. "If I hear you passin' around any more wild talk like that, I'll run you in. Now button up your lip and get out of here."

Thus Mark Sin the gambler was banished from Half Moon Street. But he went with lagging step, muttering the curse of Yang-Yin under his breath, for he had suffered loss of money and loss of face, both equally precious to the slanteyed sons of Han.

"If he tries to make any more trouble for you, Shang Yao," O'Hara said, "let me know, and I'll take care of him."

"*Kan hsieh,* Sah-jin," the merchant replied, with a Number One kowtow, which is a mark of respect seldom accorded to a white devil. "The house of Shang stands ever deeper in thy debt."

DESPITE Sergeant O'Hara's warning, Mark Sin persisted in spreading his tale of robbery to all who would listen, but he met only with a polite and skeptical silence. It was generally agreed that young Lee's name would never find itself written in the Book of Superior Virtue, but the word of Shang Yao was a thing beyond questioning.

"Time holds the key to every lock," said Sam Sing the barber. "If by any chance this deed was young Lee's clever manner of revenge, then there will be an end to the matter; but if it is a night-devil come among us to rob and plunder, then he will strike again."

Then Pao Tzu the apothecary had his money-hat snatched from his head, at almost the identical spot where Mark Sin had been robbed, and the gambler's accusations suffered further discredit.

"*Hoyá*—the hat was gone from my head quicker than a wink," the apothecary bewailed. "I see no one—I hear no one! It was like devil-magic!"

The fat gambler was doubly furious at the news, first because of the open jeering which now greeted his outcries against Shang Lee, and secondly because old Pao Tzu had been on his way for an evening's gaming at Mark Sin's.

And in quick succession there were other victims of the mysterious night-devil of Paradise Court: Long Jon the tea-house proprietor, Hugh Lee the goldsmith, and Gow Yat, a dealer in the forbidden *chandoo*—all had their money-hats snatched away with the same silent and baffling dexterity.

"What say you now, Mark Sin?" the gambler was asked on all sides with a mocking slyness. "Art thou still certain that Shang Lee and the night-devil are one and the same?"

"Has it been proven otherwise?" Mark Sin would snarl. "Who has seen his face or heard his voice? Is there one man among you who has proof it is *not* Shang Lee?"

"The honorable word of Shang Yao the merchant is proof enough for us," they would answer, delighted to see his nostrils flare and his fat chins quiver with rage.

Now one of Mark Sin's neighbors in Paradise Court was Chun Lum, who was a seller of tickets for the Lottery of Happy Words.

"This night-devil is naught but a creeping coward, a sneaking snatcher of hats!" Chun Lum declared in a loud voice, and boasted of the goodly supply of money he always carried in his red silk sash. "Let him come and try his thieving tricks against me—if he dare!"

And Chun Lum's boasting was listened to with respect, for it was well known that no man in all Chinatown was quicker with the knife. He could whip his fighting blade across a room and slice the living flame from a candle.

BUT even Chun Lum's great skill was of no avail against the stealthy attack of the night-devil, who lost no time in accepting the broadcast challenge. The encounter took

place in the darkness of the alley which runs from Orange Street to Paradise Court.

The knife-man halted and froze at the scrape of a stealthy footstep, plucked a throwing-blade from his sash and sent it whizzing when his warning call was answered only by a mocking chuckle.

Chun Lum heard the blade bite into wood. Instantly he snatched out a second knife and stood ready, half crouching, eyes straining against the inky shadows.

Then smothering folds of loose black cloth settled over his head and shoulders, and as his knife-arm swept out in a blind arc something crashed against the back of his head.

Chun Lum awoke to find himself sprawled on the cold bricks, with a blue coat man shining a flashlight into his face, and Sergeant O'Hara bending over him.

"The night-devil, Sah-jin!" Chun Lum moaned, feeling the egg-sized lump on the back of his head and the torn and empty folds of his money-sash.

"Did you get a look at the guy?" O'Hara asked.

"No see!" Chun groaned.

"Damn!" O'Hara growled. "If he'd only come out in the open just once. One look at his face—that's all we need."

But O'Hara was quite mistaken in that theory, for the night-devil's most daring exploit soon followed: an inside robbery committed under blazing lights, and the result only a deepening of the mystery.

LATE one night, after the fan-tan players had taken their departure from Mark Sin's House of Chance in Paradise Court, the fat gambler was sitting alone in his private room, sorting out his money, counting off capital funds and table-profits into separate piles.

Then quite suddenly his head jerked up, and his eyes grew round as jade buttons; for there stood a silent figure watching him from the doorway. A sombre figure clad entirely in black—round black hat, long black *shaam*, and a slitted black mask through which gleamed a pair of beady black eyes.

Moreover, a gloved hand held a long-nosed black revolver, which pointed very steadily at the rotund paunch of the startled gambler.

A sheaf of crumpled bills fluttered from Mark Sin's nerveless fingers as the black pistol jerked in a menacing gesture which said as plainly as any spoken words: *Stand up! Get back against the wall! Keep silence or die!*

Mark Sin rose to his feet like a man hypnotized, but behind the bulging eyes his swift brain weighed the value of his precious hoard against the promise of death leering from that round black muzzle.

"Hai!" Mark Sin screamed, and with one frantic heave up-ended the table, himself making a headlong dive behind its sheltering wood as the flash and roar of gunfire filled the room.

The night-devil snatched here and there at the scattering bills, then leaped through the doorway in flight. Instantly Mark Sin scrambled to his feet and drove his fist through a window pane, screeching "Help! Help! Pohliss!" into the brooding silence of the Court.

The fleeing night-devil was halfway down the stairs when Mark Sin's *mafoo* came running from the back regions to cut off his escape.

"Shan-choh! Halt!" the broad-shouldered *mafoo* cried, shaking a crooked Manchu knife from his sleeve as he leaped up the stairs to tackle the marauder.

Then the black pistol spat its roaring flame point-blank, and the *mafoo* gave a choking cry as he clutched his chest. The knife clattered on the stairs as he sagged against the wall and tumbled backwards.

The night-devil made a flying leap over the prostrate body, tore open the front door and instantly melted into the inky shadows of the Court, his midnight garb part and parcel of the darkness which served him as a never-failing cloak.

Mark Sin's shrill cries were answered by a police whistle from Orange Street—another whistle sounded on Mulberry Lane—and in less than two minutes Sergeant O'Hara sprang from a red prowl car.

O'Hara found the *mafoo* lying dead at the foot of the stairs, and Mark Sin so excited he was quite unaware of the blood dripping from the hand he had driven through the glass pane.

"Quick, Sah-jin! To Half Moon Street!" the gambler urged breathlessly. "To the shop of Shang Yao! This time we catch the night-devil!"

"Hold on, now," O'Hara growled. "You just told us this fellow was masked, so how do you know it was Shang Lee?"

"Yiss, Sah-jin, from head to foot he is like a black shadow, but when he run away I see his feet. He wear white-devil shoe, Sah-jin—of yellow leather—like I see young Shang Lee wear!"

"Yellow shoes, eh?" Sergeant O'Hara straightened. "Okay, Mark Sin, maybe you've got a real clue this time. Come on, we'll check on that."

SO it was that Shang Yao's *mafoo* was roused from sleep at the unseemly Hour of the Rat by a brisk hammering on the shop door, and came grumbling to draw the squeaking bolts.

"Stand aside, Wing Tow," Sergeant O'Hara commanded. "We have business with Shang Lee."

"Hai, Master! Master!" the *mafoo* called up the stairs until Shang Yao appeared, huddled in a sleeping-robe.

"Hola, Sah-jin!" Shang greeted anxiously. "What brings you to my door at such a strange hour?"

"There's been robbery and murder at Mark Sin's place," O'Hara replied. "It's the night-devil again. I've got to check up on your son's whereabouts."

Then Shang Yao caught sight of the fat gambler and stiffened into instant hostility. "Sah-jin, you do but waste your time on false reports put out by a man of evil tongue. My son is in his room, asleep."

"Yes, by Tao!" the *mafoo* confirmed, glaring at Mark Sin. "Shang Lee has not stirred from the house this night."

"Aye, no doubt he is still busy with the ninety-nine prayers to Milo Fo." the gambler sneered. "The house of Shang should study well the twenty-second prayer, which concerns the telling of truth."

"Master of lies, I will slit thy crooked tongue!" Wing Tow retorted, snatching a knife from his girdle as he sprang forward.

But Sergeant O'Hara stepped between them and wrested the knife from the furious *mafoo.* "Cut out the arguments!" he ordered sharply. "Wing Tow, get back to your room. Mark Sin, stand there and keep your mouth shut. I'm running this show."

They obeyed.

O'Hara then went on up the stairs to Shang Lee's quarters. He found the young Chinese stretched out in bed, apparently fast asleep.

"Hey, wake up!" the sergeant called, shaking him by the shoulder. Young Lee grunted and sat up, blinking and yawning as he listened to the charge against him.

"Mark Sin is a Number One stupid fool," young Lee declared with undisguised contempt. "All night I was busy here with the writing of prayers . . . Yiss, Sah-jin, it is true I have yellow shoes, but also I have black ones, and white ones. Are these white devil shoes not sold to

everyone in the shops of Mulberry Lane? *Hoya*—it proves nothing."

And Shang Lee leaned back nonchalantly against the wall, smoking a cigarette while Sergeant O'Hara proceeded to make a thorough search of the room.

But young Lee's wardrobe was exclusively rice-face; there was no round black Chinatown hat nor a *shaam* of any description, and no trace of mask, gloves, or black revolver.

"Okay, Lee," O'Hara said when he had finished, and went downstairs to ask Wing Tow a few questions.

The *mafoo* explained that the shop closed at nine o'clock sharp, when heavy bolts were drawn on both doors. He also demonstrated how noisy these were in movement, so that no one could possibly slip out during the night without rousing him, as he slept in an alcove of the shop itself, whose windows were webbed with thick iron bars.

"Well, Mark Sin," O'Hara announced, "It looks like young Lee has a clean ticket. We'll have to cross his name off the list."

"Not so!" the gambler cried out in fierce protest. "Shang Lee is the night-devil of Paradise Court! I say it again in a loud voice."

"Forget it," O'Hara snapped impatiently. "You've got Shang Lee on the brain. While we're running around on this wild goose chase, the real night-devil has had plenty of time to make his getaway."

Mark Sin sucked in his breath, a relentless glint in his heavy-lidded eyes. "Sah-jin, it has been said that not every man who makes the sound of snoring is fast asleep."

"What do you mean?" O'Hara demanded, but the fat gambler only stuck his hands into his sleeves and started homeward through the starlit hush of Half Moon Street.

THE Chinatown Squad labored day and night to solve the Paradise Court mystery, but their best efforts went for naught. The elusive night-devil remained a masked shadow whose face no man had seen, whose voice no man had heard.

Then the moon-faced gambler paid a surprise visit to the Squad headquarters in the precinct station.

"*Ala wah,* Sah-jin," he said with a polite bow. "Have your blue coat men put their hands upon the night-devil?"

"Not yet," O'Hara admitted with a scowl. "But give us time; we'll catch up with him. He made a good haul at your place and he'll lie low for a while. But when the money runs out, he'll be back at his tricks again, and next time we'll slap him down for murder."

"Patience is one of the Seven Virtues," Mark Sin observed blandly, "but is not a short road better than a long one?"

Sergeant O'Hara pricked up his ears. "Stop beating around the bush, Mark Sin. If you've dug up any new evidence, out with it!"

The fat gambler gave a sly smile. "Sah-jin, meet me at the Plum Blossom Joss House when the rice-face bell strikes twelve tonight, and I will show you the short road to the night-devil."

"So you're on to something!" O'Hara exclaimed. "Come on, spill it."

But Mark Sin shook his head. "I say nothing. Sah-jin will see with his own eyes."

NEEDLESS to say, Sergeant O'Hara kept his midnight rendezvous to the second. Mark Sin was waiting for him under the lantern of peacock blue glass which marked the joss house.

"Ha! We're heading for Shang Yao's again," O'Hara said to himself as the fat gambler led the way through Peking Court to Half Moon Street. But Mark Sin waddled on past Shang Yao's shop without so much as a glance at the darkened windows, until they came to the far end of the street where a spreading maple tree cast its shadow over the corner house.

"Ssst! Ssst!" Mark Sin signaled; and a black-hatted Oriental joined them from the darkness of a nearby doorway.

It was Chun Lum, the knife-throwing lottery agent, who had been felled and robbed so soon after his boasting defiance of the night-devil.

"Has he come, Chun?" the gambler whispered.

"Not yet," Chun Lum replied. "But it is near his usual time, so let us keep well back in the shadows."

"Who's coming, and from where?" O'Hara demanded, but Mark Sin drew a sudden hissing breath. "Silence, Sah-jin! Speak no word. Watch the tree."

Something very odd was happening to the maple tree. The thick leaves began a shivering rustle, although there was not the slightest breeze at the moment; and the next instant a shadowy figure came swinging down through the branches and dropped to the ground with the lightness of a cat, giving a swift glance along the deserted street.

Even without a clear view of the slant-eyed face under a jaunty Panama hat, Sergeant O'Hara would have recognized the bold check pattern of the suit, the colored silk shirt, the gaudy tie.

"It's Shang Lee!" O'Hara murmured. "But why in thunder was he hiding in the tree?"

"Not hiding, Sah-jin," Mark Sin corrected. "Shang Lee use this tree like ladder to climb down from the roofs of Half Moon Street."

"From the roofs!" O'Hara echoed sharply, and the startling truth burst upon him with the harsh, cold light of a Very rocket.

Shang Lee's constant alibi of work on the ninety-nine prayers was nothing but a clever frame-up! By way of the rooftops and the tree, he could escape from his room and prowl Chinatown as he pleased, while Shang Yao was pledging his word that he had not stirred from the house!

"So that's how he put it over!" O'Hara growled, glaring after the jaunty Oriental moving briskly down the cross-street. "Come on. We'll grab him right now and settle this night-devil business."

"Wait, Sah-jin," Mark Sin counseled. "Shang Lee will not run away. Chun Lum and I have watch him and follow him before this night. Always he go to the same place, a white devil gaming house, where there is a wheel of numbers instead of fan-tan.

"When the Hour of the Rat is ended, he will return by the same secret road. But if he find Sah-jin waiting for him in his room—*hoya*—he will have a Number One surprise, yiss?"

"Yes," O'Hara conceded. "That's not a bad idea: catch him red-handed . . . Mark Sin, you've pulled off a smart piece of work."

A buttery smile spread over the gambler's moon-face. "It has been said, Sah-jin, that the slow of foot are often swift of thought."

WHEN Sergeant O'Hara rapped on the door of Shang Yao's darkened shop, Wing Tow came so promptly to draw the creaking bolts that O'Hara remarked on his speed.

"I could not sleep this night," Wing Tow replied. "Three times I cast the prayer-blocks, and each time the evil Sign of Yo Fei came uppermost."

"Well, the prayer-blocks didn't lie," O'Hara said grimly. "Call your master."

"I'm afraid I have Number One bad news for you this

time," O'Hara announced when the merchant appeared and told him about young Lee's secret means of exit from the house.

Shang Yao's hands began to tremble before O'Hara had finished; and even then the honorable merchant could not credit the tale until they had gone upstairs and seen for themselves that young Lee's room was empty and deserted.

"Look at this," O'Hara directed, raising the unlatched window and catching hold of a rope-end hanging from the roof cornice—a strong rope knotted here and there to make the climbing easier.

Shang Yao stood stiff as a ramrod, staring at the dangling rope, but with such a look of anguish on his face that O'Hara was moved to pity.

"I'm sorry it turned out like this, Shang Yao. But I've got to do my duty."

"Aye, Sah-jin," Shang replied. "Your word is pledged to the rice-face law, and no man of honor may break his pledge."

O'Hara looked around the room, thinking: If I could find where Lee's hidden that night-devil outfit of his, I'd have him nailed down like a pig under a gate.

But the most thorough search did not unearth the black *shaam*, mask and hat which were the night-devil's working uniform.

"I'm going to put out the light now," O'Hara announced. "Shang Lee may come back sooner than we expect. I want to surprise him into a confession."

They waited in the darkened room with its moonlit window, Shang Yao with stolid Oriental patience, Sergeant O'Hara smoking a cigarette as he paced restlessly to and fro. The iron-throated bell in St. Mary's steeple struck two o'clock and quavered into silence.

"What in hell's keeping him?" O'Hara muttered impatiently, and flipped the butt of his cigarette between the snarling jaws of the stone *foo* dog which stood facing the stairs.

But a minute or two later he abruptly stopped his pacing, sniffing the air. "Do you smell anything, Shang Yao?"

The merchant stirred in the shadows. "It is a smell of burning, Sah-jin."

"Yeah," O'Hara agreed, "and it's not incense, either. Phew!"

The acrid smell grew stronger, and then O'Hara saw thin wisps of gray smoke curling through the shaft of moonlight.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "It's coming from the *foo* dog!"

THEN O'Hara remembered the cigarette butt he had thrown away, and sprang toward the smoking *foo* dog. He lifted the three-foot beast of greenish stone and held it upside down, shaking it vigorously.

Flying sparks showered through the thickening smoke, and a wadded mass of dark material bulged from the hollow jaws and dropped to the floor.

"Well, I'll be damned!" O'Hara exclaimed as he stamped out the smoldering flames and fanned away the choking white smoke.

For there on the floor lay the scorched remains of a thin black *shaam*, together with a crumpled black hat, a mask, and a pair of black gloves. Shang Lee had used the hollow *foo* dog as a cache for his night-devil disguise!

And at that very same moment they heard a faint crackling from the tin roof overhead; the stealthy scrape of cautious footsteps; the faint creaking of a rope . . .

"Quiet!" O'Hara whispered. "It's Shang Lee!"

A dark shadow blotted out the moonlit panes; softly the window slid upward in its groove . . .

O'Hara clicked the light switch, and a quick gasp came from the startled Shang Lee, caught with one leg thrusting in over the sill.

His eyes darted from the cold and stony features of Shang Yao to the no less stern face of Sergeant O'Hara, and he knew that the plundering career of the night-devil had run its course.

But as Sergeant O'Hara stepped forward, Shang Lee's hand darted to the revolver in his pocket. He fired through the cloth, and the next moment was scrambling back over the sill and climbing the knotted rope.

"Stop, or I'll shoot!" O'Hara yelled, but before he could reach the window the nimble Chinese boy was on the roof.

Heedless of danger, Sergeant O'Hara swarmed up the rope in swift pursuit. He flattened against the cornice as Shang Lee turned and shot again, spurting bits of roof-gravel into his face. Then he sprang to his feet, pumping steel-jacketed bullets across the chimney-pots as he raced after the fleeing figure.

SHANG YAO heard two more shots fired, farther away away this time. The houses all around were rousing into light and life, windows opening, singsong voices shouting questions back and forth.

When Wing Tow came running up the stairs he found his master staring at the round black hole in the plaster where young Lee's bullet had buried itself.

"Master, it is a night of endless evil!" the *mafoo* mourned. "And we can do nothing."

"Nothing," Shang Yao echoed in a dull voice.

Now the police whistles were shrilling everywhere, and there was more shooting in the distance: scattered shots, as if a running fight were in progress.

Then came silence—a brooding and ominous silence, after all the sounds of dramatic activity.

"Wing Tow, go into the street and bring me news," Shang ordered.

Alone in the shop, the merchant waited, straining his ears, wondering about Shang Lee's fate. It was impossible that young Lee could elude the blue coat men, for who in Chinatown would give shelter to the dreaded night-devil? At any moment the *mafoo* would return with word that Shang Lee was a prisoner—wounded, perhaps dead.

Shang Yao braced himself for bad news as hasty steps sounded in the dark street. The shop door swung open, but it was not Wing Tow who glided in so stealthily; it was Shang Lee himself, gasping and panting for breath, his clothing torn, bleeding scratches on his face and hands.

"Save me, Father Shang!" he cried desperately. "I am hurt; I fell from the tree in my escape from Sah-jin. The blue coat men watch every street. Hide me or I am lost."

"Night-devil!" Shang Yao replied in a harsh voice. "Thief, robber, spiller of blood!"

"Have pity!" Shang Lee pleaded. "Save me, and I will make amends for my evil courses. I will journey to the Dragon Land and seek a hero's death in battle. Am I not of the house of Shang? Wouldst thou betray thy brother's son into the hands of the white devils? Wouldst thou break thy sacred pledge to my father, made as he lay dying . . ."

Shang Yao looked at him long and searchingly, his face a hard, inscrutable mask. "It is true," he said slowly. "I did give my plighted word to thy father . . . I will save thee from the blue coat men. Come!"

Leading the way into an inner room, the merchant opened a section of the lacquered wall-paneling, disclosing a metal-lined closet which he used for the storage of his precious jade carvings and Ming porcelain.

It was a secret place, unknown even to Wing Tow, and

so cunningly built that the sharpest eye would never suspect its existence.

"Hide thyself within, and keep strict silence," Shang Yao directed. "No doubt the blue coat men will return and search the house."

"There is scarcely room to stand upright," young Lee complained, squeezing himself into the narrow space. "I will die for lack of air."

"Breathe slowly and with care," Shang Yao replied. "There is air enough for an hour or two, till the danger be past. Now I will close the panel—"

"Wait!" young Lee said, a wary gleam in his eye. "Thou wilt not betray me to the blue coat men, no matter what may happen? Thou wilt swear it by the triple oath?"

The merchant's voice grew sharp with anger. "Have I not said I will hide thee? Is not the word of Shang Yao sufficient?"

"And thou wilt stay nearby?" young Lee persisted. "So that if I grow faint for air, thou wilt open the panel at my knock?"

"I will keep watch in this room," Shang Yao replied. "And when I hear thee knock, I will open."

"Wah!" said young Lee as the secret panel slid back into place.

THEN the clang-clang of the police black wagon sounded on Mulberry Lane and turned off into Half Moon Street, and in a few moments Wing Tow came hurrying back to the shop to make his report.

"Master, Shang Lee has made his escape from the blue coat men!" he said breathlessly. "But the Sah-jin lies stretched upon the ground. He is hurt very bad, master, hit with bullet."

"Ai-yee!" Shang Yao groaned. "This night of ten thousand sorrows!" And he dashed out into the street to follow the black wagon, which had halted at the next corner. The blue coat men were lifting the wounded O'Hara onto a stretcher when Shang Yao arrived at the spot.

"Sah-jin!" he quavered, bending down beside the wounded officer. "Is it Shang Lee who shoot you?"

"Don't worry, Shang Yao. I'll be all right," O'Hara replied, trying to smile. "It's not your fault . . . ."

"Sure, you'll be okay, Sergeant," one of the blue coats put in. "But it was a narrow squeak. If that bullet was an inch lower—"

Then they lifted the stretcher into the black wagon, and it went clanging on its way to the emergency ward.

With slow and deliberate step Shang Yao returned to his shop and entered the inner room. Grimly he stared at the lacquered panel which covered the secret crypt.

He understood now why Shang Lee had been so insistent on an exact pledge before he entered the hiding place.

Shang Yao stared at the scarred fingers of his hand, the visible sign of his eternal debt to Sergeant O'Hara, who had so bravely saved his life at the risk of his own, and was now rewarded by a bullet—and from one bearing the name of Shang!

And the man of incorruptible honor was filled with a seething rage at the trickery and deceit young Lee had played upon him.

"But what can I do?" he wailed despairingly. "How can I pay my sacred debt to the man of the West, when I have pledged my word to the son of the East?"

Then came the blue coat men to make a search of the house, tramping noisily from room to room, prying into every nook and cranny.

"All right, Shang," they said, when they had satisfied themselves. "We're leaving men on guard front and rear, in case Lee should double back this way, looking for a place to hide."

Shang Yao made a stiff bow, saying nothing, but as soon as they had gone, he stripped off his blue silk *shaam* and with shaking hands hurriedly donned a ceremonial robe embroidered with a silver dragon.

Then, lighting a fat wax candle, he held it sideways, so that the melting wax dripped steadily into a little porcelain dish.

And all this while Shang Yao kept glancing toward the secret panel. The hidden closet was narrow as a coffin, and at any moment young Lee would begin rapping frantically for a breath of fresh air.

Hastily Shang Yao dipped his trembling fingers into the molten wax, for his harried brain had shaped a desperate scheme by which he might pay his life-debt to the man of the West and still keep his pledged word to the son of the East—to open the secret panel as soon as he heard Shang Lee's tapping—

"Wah!" he whispered through clenched teeth, hurriedly thrusting the two plugs of soft white wax into his ears—pressing them in deeply and firmly, so that his hearing would be sealed against every sound, even the terrified pounding of fists from behind the smooth-jointed lacquer paneling.

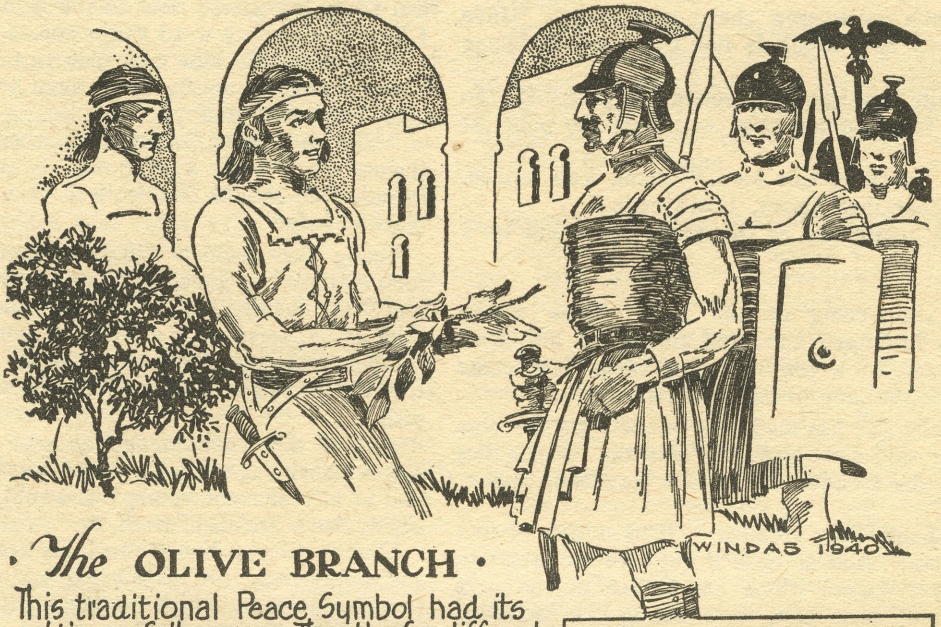
He could not hear his own words:

"The plighted word of the house of Shang must not be broken!"

DESTROYER!
A dramatic and moving novel
By Steve Fisher
Beginning in next week's *Argosy*

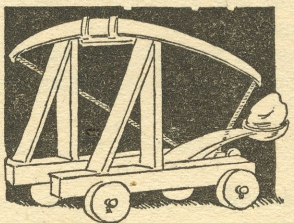
LEGENDS OF THE LEGIONARIES

ORIGINS OF THE CUSTOMS AND SAYINGS OF THE FIGHTING-MEN : by W·A·WINDAS



The OLIVE BRANCH

This traditional Peace Symbol had its origin as follows :- Though of a different kind, oil was as important in ancient warfare as in modern. When a tribe was defeated, an olive branch was sent to the conqueror, meaning of course, "Spare our lives, and we will give you all our oil."



Ancient HEAVY ARTILLERY

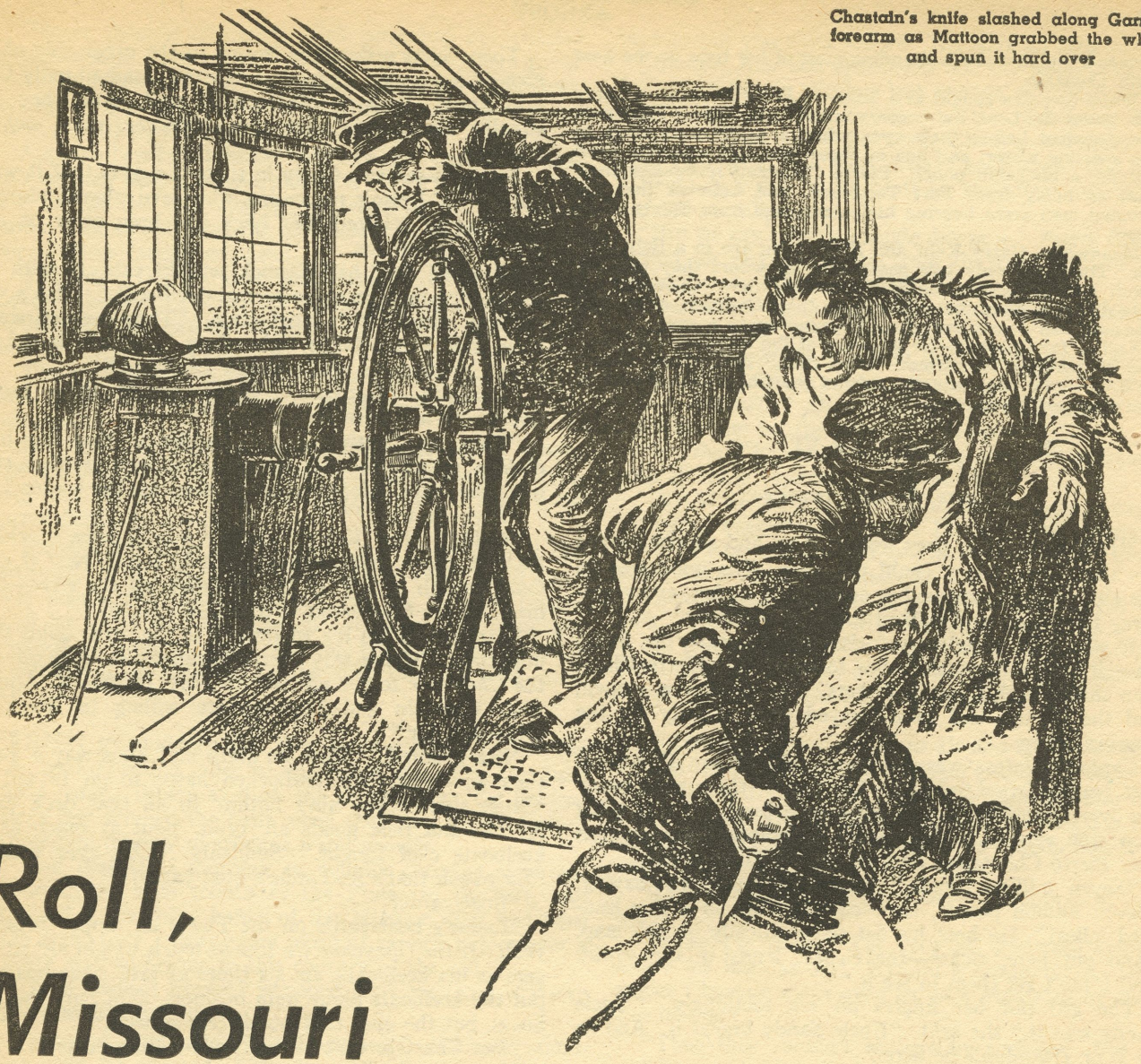
Pre-gunpowder artillery reached its largest size during the reign of Justinian the Great. Belisarius (his general) used huge ballistae that threw 1,000 lb. stones in excess of half a mile.

CHOCOLATE SOLDIERS

Parliament itself gave this jeering title to the hundreds of citizens absorbed into government jobs, put in uniform, and given high rank.

GALLIPOLI PINES

In the Anzac Memorial, Sydney, Australia, there is a small plantation of pine trees grown from seed collected at Gallipoli, where the Anzacs served in the World War with such exemplary heroism.



Chastain's knife slashed along Garry's forearm as Mattoon grabbed the wheel and spun it hard over

Roll, Missouri

By Roy de S. Horn

Synopsis

DRIVING their canoe against time, GARRY KENT and NICK KELSO, trappers, have fought the Missouri and the Mississippi three thousand miles down from the Sweetwater to St. Louis settlements.

SANDY MACLEOD, the American Fur Company's representative on the upper Sweetwater, has given Kent an urgent message for the powerful PIERRE CHOUTEAU, the Company's western manager. In a note he recommends Kent as pilot to guide the Company's new steamboat, the *Cheyenne*, on its pioneering voyage up the turbulent Missouri.

And not only that. MacLeod, a sick man, had entrusted to Kent a verbal warning for Chouteau: "Trouble—big trouble . . . Too many outsiders coming in. Tell Pierre Chouteau he must not fail." What the trouble is, MacLeod in his fevered mumblings had not disclosed.

But the partners are too late. BIG JOE CHASTAIN, boss captain of all the up-river fur brigades, has beaten them into the settlement after nearly capsizing their canoe on the way; and he also has brought Chouteau a message—presumably written and signed by MacLeod:

It is so necessary that the Cheyenne reach Fort Tecumseh that I am sending you for pilot my right-hand man, Joe Chastain. . . . Trust no one else! The Cheyenne must come up-river this year!

And then, when Chastain reveals that Garry Kent and Nick Kelso are free trappers, who deal outside the Company's posts, Chouteau calls them liars and spies, and orders them out. At first he refuses even to sell them passage on the *Cheyenne;* and when Kent forces his hand, he relents but warns the trappers that he will hang them to the nearest tree at the first sign of trouble.

THE stage is set for plenty of trouble. When the *Cheyenne* starts up-river with Chouteau and his party, its crew are incompetent to navigate the treacherous Missouri. CAPTAIN WATERS, cringing and unwell, is lacking in experience; MATTOON, the red-headed mate, is arrogant and suspicious; and Chastain, as pilot, soon appears to be bent on wrecking the boat. Only DUNBAR, the Scotch engineer, seems to be able and trustworthy.

There's even more to worry Kent: the presence of JEANNIE MACLEOD, Sandy's niece—a beautiful girl who, having seen Garry in a street brawl not of his own making, looks on him with considerable scorn. And it makes matters no better for

This two-part serial, herein concluded, began in last week's Argosy

him to know that she is spending most of her time on the boat with Chastain.

When they are caught in a Missouri River storm it is Garry who saves the boat; but tragedy strikes near them. Four men are drowned before their eyes when a keelboat capsizes in the swirling water; and one of those men had waved a hand bearing a buckskin pouch. Pierre Chouteau recognizes their boat as being from Fort Tecumseh, and believes that the doomed men were bearing him a message from Sandy MacLeod.

Meanwhile, Garry Kent and Nick Kelso are in a tight corner. There are only two passengers on whom they can depend: BEAVER BUTLER and SI PEARSON, hunters. Chouteau not only distrusts them; he continues to trust Chastain, even after Chastain has nearly run the *Cheyenne* on to a snag.

And as for Chastain—he is aware of the trappers' suspicion, and is therefore dangerous. "Next time," Nick warns Garry, "it'll be us he tries to snag, an' not the *Cheyenne*. It's us or him now, an' he knows it." . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE WOODEN INDIAN

THAT night, after they were tied up and supper cooked and eaten, Garry could not sleep. His mind was on the girl, trying to remember every little action, every gesture. He got up and walked the deck aimlessly.

It was with complete surprise that presently he found himself beside the little cabin forward that Pierre Chouteau shared with Captain Waters. The window was open, and the curtain had been swayed back slightly by the evening breeze.

Captain Waters was not there with Pierre Chouteau. But Jeannie MacLeod was. The two of them were bending over something spread out over a bunk. It was a big map: the very map that Garry remembered having seen over Pierre Chouteau's desk in the St. Louis office.

"Seven million people," Pierre Chouteau was saying. "Seven million people, crowded like bugs in a few hundred miles!" He beat his fist spasmodically on the map. "And out here, riches—the richest lands in the world. And I can't get them to see it."

The girl put her fingers on his soothingly. "Uncle Sandy sees it," she said. "Uncle Sandy knows it. And so do I, or I wouldn't be here."

"Aye. You are a good girl—a good girl, and fit kin to Alexander MacLeod." Pierre Chouteau pressed her fingers in his, then turned to trace on the map again. "No; other people know too—know how rich it is. They will try to stop us, to get there first. Else why all the trouble, the delays? Why Sandy MacLeod's message? Not one messenger with a note, but two! Which is the traitor—"

"Traitor!" The girl's voice rose. "You think, then, that it is—is the free trapper?"

"Nom de dieu!" Pierre Chouteau lifted his right hand, clenched it until the knuckles went white in the candlelight. "If I but knew, do you think I would worry? I would hang that one before sunrise, if I had to haul on the rope with my own hands. But I do not know. And so I must wait—"

"Shh-h-h!" The girl's hands shot out, snatched the map, began to roll it. From forward had come that hacking cough, then slow, dragging footsteps. "Captain Waters coming back!"

As the figure of the emaciated captain loomed, Garry bent low, slipped around the corner and away on his moccasin toes.

RICHES—so there were immeasurable riches up the Missouri. But what were they? Where? Sandy MacLeod knew, and Sandy MasLeod's headquarters was at Fort Tecumseh. And the *Cheyenne* had to get up to Fort Tecumseh this summer!

Then Garry's thoughts leaped to the other side of this incredible puzzle. Chastain knew too—undoubtedly Chastain knew. Perhaps Mattoon as well. And they were equally determined that the *Cheyenne* must not get up-river.

So engrossed was Garry in these thoughts that it wasn't until Nick Kelso's moccasins whispered almost alongside him that he realized that Nick had been away on some private mission too.

"Knowed that half-Canuck was in cahoots with that red-headed mate in some sort o' devilment." Nick's whisper was purring with satisfaction. "They been stirrin' up them hell-rakin's for'rd right along. But this is the first time I ketched 'em really makin' medicine."

"Chastain—Mattoon?" Garry named them instinctively. "What were they doing?"

"They was settin' in the shadder o' that big b'iler, dividin' up somethin' as fat an' round as a grizzly's stummick the night before he goes to sleep for the winter."

"Dividing what?"

"Gold!" Nick Kelso's whisper was like the crackle of ice. "A bag o' gold money; I could see it, hear it clink. Gold enough to buy all the keelboats on the river—or to hire a dozen *Cheyennes* wrecked an' pirated."

"Pirated! Then it's whatever's in the cargo holds that's important. That's why Pierre Chouteau is so anxious for the *Cheyenne* to get up-river to Fort Tecumseh. And it's what Chastain and Mattoon are willing to wreck the *Cheyenne* for."

Nick grunted. "Then we gotta find some way o' pryin' them hatch-bars an' padlocked hasps to git in an' see. 'Cause there shore ain't nothin' in all that deck cargo. Nothin' but post goods an' grub, 'bout as much as ten keelboats c'ud freight." Suddenly Nick's eyes widened. "By gawsh that's it: Ladue's boat-yards!"

"Boat-yards?"

"Ladue's boat-yards on the Platte an' upper Missouri, yeah. If the *Cheyenne* c'n tote as much freight an' passengers as ten keelboats, an' six times as fast, steamboats 'ull put the keelboats plum' outa business. Not only the keelboats, but the ones that builds 'em as well."

"But Chastain isn't in the boat-building business! He's a Company man."

"Wouldn't be the first Comp'ny man that tried to feather his nest on the side. Ladue builds a sight o' the keelboats an' mackinaws that comes down the river, an' I've seen Chastain over there leastways a dozen times. If it ain't Ladue's halfbreed gal that Chastain's int'rested in, it must be the boat-yards; mebbe both. An' if the first steamboat up wrecked herself, steamboats wouldn't be no more danger to the keelboat business."

"Maybe." Garry considered this new angle. "Maybe. But I still think it's what's in the holds that's most important. We'll have to keep an eye on them, see that no one else breaks into them if we can't."

"Beaver Butler an' Si Pearson'll help watch," said Nick Kelso. "River pirates or hoss-stealin' Sioux, they'd fight one quick as the other. Frenchy Lenoir c'n fight like hell, too; only he don't give a p'tic'lar damn who he fights."

But Garry shook his head. "Not Frenchy Lenoir. But get Butler and Pearson to take turns watching. And start tonight."

NEXT morning Nick reported with a crestfallen grin. "Reckon yo're right. Chastain hisself come pokin' round last night; an' was he s'prised when I riz up an' asked 'im what it was he was lookin' for, an' mebbe could I help 'im find it."

"You should have waited and watched, so as to catch him red-handed if he tried to break in," said Garry.

"Never thought o' that." Nick scratched his grizzled head ruefully. "Next time I will. Looks like they're gittin' worried. Platte ain't fur away now. We're gittin' up-river, even if we are slow. An' once June flood starts they won't have much longer to work. Nor us either."

Apparently others realized that too. For once Nick Kelso's leg was almost caught and torn off by a quick coil of the cordell line that snakily tightened as the *Cheyenne,* under a signal bell from the pilot house, suddenly went full speed astern instead of ahead.

And twice Garry's keen watch from his self-appointed post in the bow detected the ripple of hidden snags when apparently they had not been sighted at all from the pilot house.

The glares directed upon him each time from Chastain and Mattoon convinced Garry that these things weren't accidents.

Still the *Cheyenne* pushed herself upstream in safety, though Garry's eyes were bloodshot from constant straining, and his whole body screaming for relief from overtaxed flesh and muscle.

Pierre Chouteau's eyes became daily more pinched and anxious, his face more haggard. Captain Waters had given way completely under the strain and his sapping disease, and he spent half his time in bed now. Only the girl seemed as fresh, as eager, as ever, her spontaneous laugh ringing out as cheerily as the first day she had come aboard.

THEN so suddenly that they could scarcely realize the back-breaking labor of cordelling was over, the June flood came. Where at dusk the night before the landing stage had scraped the bank when they tied up, at dawn a three-foot interval of swirling water showed.

And that same morning an equally cheering sight appeared: the wide mouth of the Platte to the left, and beyond it the rising banks of the Missouri that had been the great river crossing and place of council before ever a white man had come to this country of the red.

"The Council Bluffs!" whooped Nick excitedly. "We've got that fur anyway."

"Council Bluffs ain't Fort Tecumseh." Mattoon, standing close by, sneered. "The brag was that the *Cheyenne* would run the Missouri river. An' she ain't run the river till she's got all the way up to Tecumseh in time to get down again."

Jeannie MacLeod and Pierre Chouteau had also scrambled down from the crowded pilot house to greet the welcome sight from the very closest point, the *Cheyenne's* bow. And suddenly the girl pointed ahead and to the right and gave a cry. "Look! A canoe—coming out from the bank. And they're waving at us."

Pierre Chouteau's sunken eyes lighted eagerly. "Stop her until they come alongside. Maybe it's a messenger from Fort Tecumseh."

But in the canoe was only a sullen-faced Indian brave and a wooden-faced squaw with a papoose on her back. Once aboard the Indian turned beady black eyes from Mattoon to Garry to Pierre Chouteau. "You got medicine on big canoe? You got medicine man?"

"Medicine?" The light in Pierre Chouteau's eyes died. "Then you have no message? You're not from Fort Tecumseh?"

"Come from Nemaha." The Indian grunted. "Bring squaw, sick papoose. Want medicine."

The squaw too was looking silently at Pierre Chouteau. But the copper-faced little bundle on her back squirmed and gave a little whimpering cry.

Pierre Chouteau turned wearily toward his cabin. "There is no doctor aboard, but I'll give you medicine. Then we'll have to put you right ashore. We have no time to wait."

Chastain, who had apparently left the wheel lashed and the paddle-wheels turning just enough to match the current, spoke from the direction of the pilot-house ladder.

"It would be bad to put them ashore so hurriedly, Monsieur Chouteau. We have always encouraged the Indians to bring their sick to the posts for treatment, instead of to their own medicine men."

"But we can't delay a single day now." Pierre Chouteau turned his anxious glance from the rising waters to the Indian brave. "Your squaw?"

The Indian shook his head. "Not squaw. Sister. Papoose him sick. You make well?"

And then Jeannie MacLeod gave a little cry, touched the Indian girl's arm in woman sympathy. "Put them ashore with a sick baby? Oh you can't, Pierre Chouteau! Surely there is room for them on the *Cheyenne.*"

"On the *Cheyenne*? An Indian girl and sick papoose, with all these *voyageurs*? Impossible."

"Not if we build a little leanto for them aft, away from the men," suggested Chastain. He looked at Jeannie MacLeod. "You would not mind, *ma'mselle?* They would be under cover, and have medicine."

Pierre Chouteau frowned, then gave in at the girl's quick nod. "Then take them aft, Mattoon, and fix up a shelter. I will give them medicine, and the cook can carry them food. And now we've wasted time enough. Cast off the canoe. Then full speed ahead, Chastain."

AS Mattoon took the Indians aft and the others returned to the pilot house, Nick Kelso grunted in Garry's ear. "Nemaha hell! They ain't from the Nemaha; they're from Ladue's boat-yard on the Platte. That Injun gal is Ladue's half-breed daughter, or I don't know buffalo bull from fat cow."

"Ladue's daughter!" Garry drew in his breath. "You're sure?"

"Shore I'm shore! The very gal I've seen spillin' out licker for her dad an' Chastain a dozen times. But yuh notice Chastain never even let on a wink that he ever seen her before."

"Then they couldn't be here by accident. But why?"

"Dunno, but it's skullduggery o' some sort. That messenger Chastain sent from Fort Leavenworth—he's had plenty time to git to the Platte whilst we were crawlin' over them sandbars. It's that boat-yard business, just like I been tellin' yuh. Even if Chastain an' Ladue could hold us up only a day or two, it 'ud mean jest that much less chance o' us gittin' to the fort an' back. This here flood ain't goin' to last forever."

But from the way the river came down, it would not only last forever, but would cover the earth in its onrush. For, fed by the melted snows on its far headwaters, the mighty Missouri was roaring into its flood stage.

It was as if a giant had wrenched loose from its bonds. Even as the Cheyenne fought desperately upstream, mighty trees on the bank swayed and toppled, the earth beneath them gnawed away by the rushing waters. Bends were wiped out overnight, new chutes and channels slashed through. No man, however often he had tripped the river before, could say where the channel might be now.

CHAPTER VII

NO FLYING HORSE

NOT even the sight of the Niobrara, the one unmistakable landmark in that madness of waters, could lift the weight of deadly exhaustion that bore down heavier and heavier with each dawn. Even whipcord sinews and frames

of iron can endure only so much. Even iron men weaken.

And Garry knew that Pearson and Butler and Nick Kelso were on their last legs, even though Nick Kelso tried to hide it with a wave of his wolf-skin hat. But Jeannie MacLeod was aglow with enthusiasm.

"The Niobrara! It's on the map—Pierre Chouteau's map. It's almost at the Dakotas; we're almost within three hundred miles of the fort now."

"Three hundred miles? Three hundred miles? *That far still?*" Unutterable weariness all but forced a groan of hopelessness from Garry Kent.

"But we'll make it." Her flashing eyes met his quickly, almost accusingly. "We'll make it!"

The confidence of her fanned the tiny spark deep within him. "Yes, we'll make it." But under his breath he unconsciously added: "If nothing happens."

It happened that very night.

Dropping into his blankets so exhausted that he lay there like a log, he fell instantly into sodden slumber. So sleep-drugged was he that it was not until the uproar broke almost directly on top of him that he waked, forced himself to sit up.

Men were shouting, calling out; feet were trampling; heavy boots crashed into Garry's ribs as some startled man stumbled over him.

"Fire! Fire!" It was Nick Kelso's voice, bellowing in the dark. "Git buckets; git water. She's afire in the cargo hold!"

And almost simultaneously Mattoon's voice joined in with a loud curse. "Somebody set 'er afire. Buckets, damn it—git buckets over the side. Chastain—Pierre Chouteau! Come quick!"

Lurching to his feet, Garry ran aft, his breath catching in his throat as the crackle of flames, the acrid smell of smoke, came to his ears and nose.

The fire had caught a quick start in the first of the two holds, and flame and strangling smoke spurted out as they jerked the hatch cover off. But Garry, with Nick Kelso and Frenchy Lenoir, dropped directly down into the smoke-filled space, choking and reeling as they fought the flames with the buckets passed to them by Butler and Pearson and the bucket brigade they had formed from the hold to the side.

It was lucky that the fire had been as soon as it had. Even so it was only after half an hour's desperate struggle that they got the flames smothered and then doused out under countless buckets of the muddy river water. Eyes smarting, faces and arms red from the scorching, they at last crawled from amid the sodden bales and barrels out into the lantern light on the deck above.

Pierre Chouteau was there, his face pinched and white, and Jeannie MacLeod, and Chastain and the red-headed mate Mattoon. They were standing in a tense little group. Only Chastain's and Mattoon's eyes glowed with a malevolent gleam.

Mattoon's voice rose in a triumphant note. "This blackbeard—this free trapper, Kelso—I been watchin' 'im. He's been poking around, curious-like, for nights. And tonight I caught him. He was right beside the hatch when it flared up—and it couldn't have caught by itself."

"Huh?" Nick Kelso gaped, his eyes bulging. Then he let out a roar. "Yuh tryin' to say I set 'er afire? Yo're a liar! It was me that hollered fire first, wasn't it?"

"After I'd seen you and yelled myself," retorted Mattoon. "You saw me then and yelled, to try to make it look like you'd just found it."

NOW Chastain edged forward. "You will remember, M'sieu Chouteau, that I warned you against having them aboard. This other free trapper—he is as dangerous as that one. His forged note failed to get him a chance, as pilot, to wreck the *Cheyenne*, so he tries to burn her up."

Jeannie MacLeod turned on him with flashing eyes. "How can you say that, when he has almost scalded himself alive, down there putting it out. I saw him down there—saw him with my own eyes."

Pierre Chouteau wiped his forehead, turned feverish eyes this way and that. "Sick—sick— It would happen when I am ill. . . . But someone set it; it couldn't have caught itself. And this trapper, Kelso, was the closest to it when it was discovered. He himself doesn't deny that."

Nick Kelso suddenly let out a dry chuckle. "No, I ain't denyin' that. But if you want to know who set it, I got a s'prise for yuh. A s'prise some folks here ain't goin' to like."

And taking half a dozen quick steps to the side, he bent over a heap of the deck cargo that had been piled there and covered with a lashed tarpaulin. Lugging something from beneath the tarpaulin, he dropped it with a grunt in the little circle of lantern light.

Before those around could gasp their surprise at the limp, bloody-faced Indian who lay there, Kelso returned with still another burden, this one alive and twisting. And though her hands and feet were tied and her mouth gagged with torn strips of the tarpaulin, the Indian girl's black eyes gleamed out beadily above the canvas strip.

"There's the ones that done it." Nick Kelso gave a triumphant crow. "Caught 'em red-handed jest as they climbed out after settin' 'er afire. If you don't believe it, yuh c'n see the blood at the edge of the hatch where I laid a gun-barr'l 'cross this brave's scalplock. I thought somebody'd be askin' fool questions, so I jest laid 'em over there to cool."

He whirled around on Chastain. "Now s'pose *you* tell us somethin'. Tell us howcome yore Injun gal friend what yuh used to spark over at Ladue's was a-settin' fire to the *Cheyenne*—an' howcome yuh never let on a-tall that yuh ever knew 'er when she first come aboard."

Pierre Chouteau gaped, Mattoon let out a smothered oath. But Chastain smiled smoothly at Pierre Chouteau.

"I'm not in the habit of noticing Indian squaws at Ladue's or any other place that I visit on Company business. But since this free trapper wants questions answered, suppose that we let the girl answer them herself." And with one downward bend he jerked the gag from the girl's mouth, slashed the thongs at her wrists and ankles.

Despite her racial stoicism, she winced as she stood upright. Then at Chastain's prodding question, she slowly raised her finger, pointed it full at Garry.

"Husban'—my husban' tell me set fire. He say Comp'ny fire-boat ruin free trappin'."

"Ruin free trappin'? Ruin the keelboat business, you mean," bellowed Nick Kelso; but Jeannie MacLeod's choking cry cut him off.

"Husband!" she exclaimed, looking from the Indian girl to Garry. "This—this is your husband?"

For a second the Indian girl's eyes flickered. Then she nodded. "Husban'—sure. Him father of sick papoose."

Garry started to make indignant denial, but the white girl turned on him with inexpressible scorn. Her face was white, but her lips were thin and set.

"Squawman! So you're just a squawman after all. And to think—to think you have even touched me with your filthy hands!" With a strangled cry, she suddenly turned and ran toward her cabin with little stumbling steps.

Anything that Garry Kent might have said then was cut off by Pierre Chouteau's brittle order. "Lock them up, Chastain. Lock them up in the hold where they set the fire. If they want to set it afire again, let them. Keep the girl under guard.

"Free trappers—I might have known, but I let myself be blinded. If I were a well man, I would hang them now—tonight—as I promised. But my head—my throat—" He put his hand gropingly to his face and neck. "It will have to wait until tomorrow."

And he turned wearily away.

Five minutes later, locked inside the tiny cargo hold, with drenched boxes and bales and kegs about them, and the smell of the scorched wood and sacking still tickling their nostrils, Nick Kelso gave a disgusted grunt.

"Told ye so. Powder-barr'l—an' us a-settin' right here in the middle of it now. It was the gal that done it. Or rather the gals: white was jest as bad as the red. We got jest as much chance o' seein' Fort Tecumseh now as a hoss has of flyin'."

CHAPTER VIII

DEAD AND DYING

SO INTENSE was the inky blackness that their eyeballs ached from it. Yet even more tormenting were the thoughts that racked Garry's brain before he could shake them off.

After three minutes in the darkness, Nick Kelso let out an explosive oath. "Slicker than a damn *loupgarou,* that Chastain. Knew we was watchin' 'im, so he fetched them Injuns aboard with that sick papoose. Figgered they'd be give a place somewheres where they could slip out and set that fire. Mebbe the papoose wasn't even sick."

"No, it was sick all right." Garry felt in his pockets. "Well, we wanted to see what was inside these holds. We're inside now—if we just had a light to see. They even took my flint and steel."

"Don't need a light to 'tend to this Injun buck." There was a rustling noise as Nick moved around, then the sound of ripping cloth.

"What are you doing, Nick?"

"Tying up this coppery devil tight. Jest as soon be shut up in the dark with a sidewinder. What you doin'?" For Garry was also moving around.

"Trying to find out what's in this hold." Suddenly Garry gave an exclamation. "Plows!"

"Plows!"

"Plows! Dozens of them. And these sacks—they feel like corn. They are. And here is wheat—and smells like oats and barley."

"For gawsh sake," said Nick, "sounds like a damn settlement. Whatever would they be takin' plows an' seed grains up the Missouri for? You didn't run onto no axes or saws, did yuh?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, I'd kinda like to get outa here 'fore daylight. You ain't forgettin' that Pierre Chouteau said he was goin' to hang us, come daybreak; an' I'm afeared he's a man of his word."

"I don't feel any axes or other tools. But we've got to get out. Chastain and Mattoon will wreck the *Cheyenne* on the first bar they see tomorrow." All at once Garry felt a small keg roll under his foot. It gurgled. He bent quickly to put his nose to the staves. "Whisky."

Nick Kelso's voice was gloomy. "Yestiddy I'd 'a been tickled plum' holler. But right now I ain't got no appetite for licker somehow."

"Not the whisky—the keg, the hoops." Garry raised the keg, brought it down heavily on another next to it. The staves came apart, and the fumes of spilling whisky came up to their nostrils.

"Even if we ain't goin' to be here to drink it, don't seem right to waste it," complained Kelso.

But Garry was jerking the iron hoops clear. He twisted one apart, straightened it. Then setting its edge across the edge of another, he began to hammer with one of the hickory staves. "This hoop's thin enough to slip between the edge of the hatch and the hatch cover. If I can make enough nicks in it, maybe it will do as a saw."

"A saw?" Nick Kelso let out a muffled whoop as the idea sank in. "I'll be pilin' some bales up so we can reach 'er while yore finishin' them nicks. I never did keer for hangin's, even to watch 'em."

WHEN they tried the nicked hoop-iron in the crevice between hatch cover and coaming, it slid through without a hitch. But it was so flexible that only on the downstroke would the crude nicked edge bite into the wood of the hatch bar.

It was deadly slow work, and when after hours of effort and blistered hands they had only cut through the bar, Nick Kelso's early hopes evaporated. "There's still that steel hasp, an' we won't get her filed through in a month of Sundays. We might as well begin usin' that other kaig o' whisky like it was intended."

"Not *through* the hasp; we'll saw around it," said Garry. "The wood of the coaming can't be any tougher than the bar."

But after another hour of work, Nick expressed his discouragement anew. "She's most daylight! I c'n hear the engineer an' his crew fussin' 'round the b'ilers. We'll git out jest in time for the hangin'."

"But it's almost through—maybe near enough so we can break it. Pile more of those bales under it here so we can both get our shoulders against the hatch."

With the bales piled and their shoulders bunched against the under side of the hatch, Garry drew a deep breath. "When I say the word, heave together. Ready? One—two—"

"Too late," said Nick Kelso. "Footsteps: I c'n hear 'em comin' with the rope now."

He was right: footsteps were tapping along the deck overhead. Garry stood tense as the sounds halted almost above. There was a fumbling at the hasp, and then the hatch slid open.

But it was only a single figure that leaned over, silhouetted against the barely graying sky. And the voice that whispered, low and hurried, was the girl's: "Garry. Garry Kent. Are you awake? Quick! You've got to hurry."

Garry Kent let out his pent-up breath. "Right here. But you— What—"

"Don't stand talking. You've got to hurry; get away before the rest wake up. Pierre Chouteau isn't well, but if he gets up and you are still aboard—" She didn't finish, but broke off in a little throaty gasp.

When Garry, with Nick at his heels, pulled himself up and onto the still darkened deck, Jeannie MacLeod's fingers tightened convulsively on his arm. "You may be a squaw man, but with a wife and—and baby—I couldn't see you hung! Take them with you, and go. You just have time to get them and escape ashore before the boat wakes up."

"Wife? Baby?" Garry started to reply, but it was Nick's voice that interrupted in a testy whisper. "Wife an' baby? Why, ma'am, Garry ain't got no more wife an' baby than a hoss has horns. I been his pardner nigh ten years, an' I oughta know."

"Not—not your wife and baby?" The girl's fingers bit deep until Garry could feel their trembling. "But—"

"Lies, m'am, all lies, jest like that writin' that half-Canuck claimed to bring from Sandy MacLeod—" began Nick Kelso. Only Garry cut him off.

"Now it is you that's wastin' time talkin', ma'am. Take

us to Pierre Chouteau. We've got to see him, quick!"

"Pierre Chouteau?" There was almost a hysterical note in the girl's voice. "He'll hang you. You've got to get away—get ashore now."

BUT Garry had already turned up the deck toward the little cabin that housed Pierre Chouteau and Captain Waters. He could hear the girl's little sobbing cry as she followed after.

But though the door opened to his touch, there was no answer to Garry's low call of "Monsieur Chouteau. Pierre Chouteau." Instead there was only the sound of feverish tossing, then mumblings, muttered words.

"He's sick." Jeannie MacLeod's voice broke in panic. "Quick—strike a light."

As he struck flint to steel and then lighted the half-burned taper in the cabin sconce, its yellow flicker brought some of that same panic to Garry Kent. For it revealed Pierre Chouteau tossing in his bunk, his face flushed and blotched, his eyes glassy and roaming constantly. And now his fevered muttering rose louder, made audible words.

"Steamboats! Steamboats! We've got to get up. Up—up-river. Mother of mercy, don't let us be too late."

But this was not the only thing that shook the taper in Garry's hands. It was the quick-caught glimpse of Captain Waters in the opposite bunk, his blotched face as thin as a skeleton's, his unseeing eyes deep-sunk, his skinny fingers plucking aimlessly at his bedclothes.

But the candle-light, the voices, had cut through the fever fog shrouding Pierre Chouteau's mind. His rambling incoherences rose louder, more excited.

"Steamboats, I tell you, MacLeod! It's the way, the only way. Riches—the greatest riches in the world. We can't let them beat us to them. Astoria—we've got Astoria—but the Oregon country is nothing, nothing to this! We've got to beat them—"

"It's not MacLeod, Pierre Chouteau." Garry sent the tense whisper rustling. "But it's his niece, and me, Garry Kent. Can you hear?"

"Eh?" Pierre Chouteau turned his head that way. But his next words sent their quick hopes crashing. "Ah, Chastain! Full speed ahead, Chastain. The *Cheyenne* must get upriver to Fort Tecumseh. Traitors—there are traitors all around. But we'll hang them, Chastain—hang them at daybreak."

"Delirious! He thinks I'm Chastain." Garry blew out the candle, pulled the girl outside. "The light bothers him. But you heard him. Now—shall I call Chastain? Tell him to get the *Cheyenne* underway at daylight?"

"That man? No, I distrust him; I hate him. The way his eyes look at me—" The girl shuddered, gave a little cry. "But I have to trust someone. The *Cheyenne* must get up to Tecumseh!" Suddenly she whirled on him, and her fingers pinched deep into Garry's elbow. "How good an American are you?"

"AMERICAN?" Garry repeated the word dazedly. "I've never thought about that. But good as the next, I hope. My grandfather fought at Bunker Hill; my father died from a British bullet in Canada, at Lundy's Lane—"

"Lundy's Lane! Uncle Sandy fought in that battle too."

"I know," said Garry quietly. "He brought back my father's canteen and his last words to my mother, all the way down in St. Louis. That is why, when Alexander MacLeod asked me, I came all the way from the Sweetwater to guide Pierre Chouteau upriver. Only it would have been better if he had told me why it was so necessary for the *Cheyenne* to run the Missouri."

"And you don't know? You don't ***already*** know?"

"All I know is that some people seem desperately anxious for the *Cheyenne* to get up, and some others just as anxious to see she doesn't."

"It's the Missouri—the whole Missouri country that's at stake. Thousands—millions of square miles!"

"But it's ours already." Garry gaped. "It's part of the Louisiana Purchase; we bought it from the French."

"And the French couldn't even tell us where the boundaries were. Oh, can't you see? How many years since we purchased Louisiana? Nearly thirty. And how many white Americans are there now on the Platte and upper Missouri? Not five hundred. A country bigger than all Europe—rivers, mountains full of gold perhaps, plains that could raise grain to feed the world—and we put less than five hundred settlers on it in thirty years."

So vibrant was she, so eager, that Garry began to feel a little of that same excitement pulsing in his veins. And she continued to thrill him with that vision that Pierre Chouteau and Sandy MacLeod had seen, and had passed on to her.

"Pole-boats—keelboats and mackinaws—can never settle the Missouri; but steamboats can. If the *Cheyenne* can get up the Missouri, other steamboats can too. Others will. It will show up as lies the things the Hudson's Bay men have been saying—"

"Hudson's Bay men!" Garry let out an exclamation.

"Yes, the Hudson's Bay men—the British in Canada—they are filtering down everywhere. They will claim the Missouri just as they are claiming the Columbia and Oregon. They are trying to spread the rumor that it is no good except for fur-trapping; that steamboats can never run the Missouri. And if the *Cheyenne* fails—if she is wrecked—our own people may believe them, until it is too late."

And then suddenly a bright light burst on Garry Kent. A light that revealed Pierre Chouteau, not as the money-pinching fur captain he was reputed, but as an American, a patriot, first of all.

"Plows!" he exclaimed. "Plows in the hold!"

"Gold," said Nick Kelso. "Canady money, I betcha, in that bag of Chastain's."

BUT Garry was already turning forward. "The pilot house—we've got to get there first," he said. "Nick, you wake up Si Pearson and Beaver Butler. Bring them to the pilot house right away—with their guns."

He threw a quick word back to the girl. "Go right to your cabin; stay there until I send for you." He heard her murmur of protest, then her small boots tapping their way along the deck aft.

Almost by the time he had climbed the pilot-house ladder and made certain that it was still deserted, Nick Kelso was back with two mountain men. The gray dawn light was stealing over the whole boat now; men were beginning to stir in their blankets.

With a grin Nick Kelso leaned a long rifle with its corded bullet-bag and powder horn in a corner, and held out another set in his other hand. "Ain't as good as ourn, but they'll do. Them *voyageurs* I took 'em offa 'll have to hunt for ourn if they want guns when they wake up."

"Butler," said Garry crisply, "we're taking the *Cheyenne* on up-stream at once. I want you and Pearson to go below, forward, and cast off the mooring lines the minute I give the word. Nick, you see that the engineer has steam up and starts the engine the instant the gong rings. Then all three of you line up on the deck just forward of the boilers. And if anybody—*anybody at all*—tries to stop you, or to go aft of that line, shoot him on the spot."

"Huh?" The mountain men gaped. "Line up across the deck? What for?"

It was the Negro cook's helper, however, who gave the answer. His stumbling feet pounded on the ladder, then his rolling eyes and sooty countenance appeared in the pilot-house door, ashen with fright.

"De cholera! De cholera—oh Lawd hab mercy!" In his terror the Negro's teeth were chattering as with the ague. "I went to wake up de white folks. Massa cap'n he daid! Massa Chouteau he sick—he groan an' cry. De cholera done got us—dey bofe daid an' dyin'!"

CHAPTER IX

BULLETS AND BUCKETS

WITH one stride Garry had him by the neck, choking the words back in his throat. "Shut up. Go below and shut up. If you open your mouth to anybody about this I'll skin you alive." And he threw, rather than pushed, the terrified Negro down the ladder steps.

But the others had heard.

"Cholery! Oh gawsh!" Beaver Butler shivered, whirled on his partner. "Come on, Si, old-timer. We're gittin' off; we're hittin' for the tall timber right now. I ain't stayin' to ketch no cholery an' turn blue an' die 'fore sundown."

"You've already been exposed. It was that Indian papoose that brought it aboard; it's already been aboard over a week." Garry's words were as quiet as his face was grim. "You'll die twice as quick in the woods without medicine as if you stay aboard. Not only that, but every man, woman, and child you meet on the river, in the mountains. You couldn't do that; you couldn't spread it like that—and still call yourselves white men."

The words, the reasoning, drove home. White-faced, the mountain men stared at Garry. "Whut—whut are yuh goin' to do?"

"Keep the healthy ones separated from the sick—and drive like hell for Fort Tecumseh where everybody can be doctored, watched, even locked up if necessary . Until we get there this boat is the safest place there is. Remember, this boat is the only place short of the Fort where medicines can be had."

"He's talkin' sense." Si Pearson nodded. "We're stickin'. Come on, Beaver, an' freshen the primin' in yore pan."

"Throw off the mooring lines as soon as you get below," called Garry after them. "Shoot anybody that tries to interfere."

As they stumbled down the ladder, somebody brushed past them, coming up. It was the girl, Jeannie MacLeod.

Garry turned on her with a glare. "You here? I told you to go to your cabin and stay there, until I sent for you. I meant it. It's the only safe place for you. Hell is loose—or is going to break loose—on this boat any minute."

"And what do you think I am—a coward?" Her cheeks were flaming, her eyes snapping. "I won't stay in my cabin. If Captain Waters and Pierre Chouteau are sick, they need medicines and nursing. That is first of all a woman's work, and I'm a woman, not a baby."

"They'll be attended to. But I said, go to your cabin and stay there." Garry caught her, held her with cruel fingers until she looked into his eyes; then set her down on the top ladder step and slammed the door in her face. "If I catch you on deck—anywhere forward—I—I'll spank you with my own hands!"

He heard her gasp, then the stumbling of her heels down the ladder. Only then did he turn back, to glance forward on the deck below.

Lucky that he did. Either the cook's helper had spread the news in his terror, or else someone had heard his words in the pilot house. Men were tumbling out of their blankets forward, were crying out hoarsely, shouting questions.

"Cut the lines! Don't stop to cast them off," Garry shouted to Beaver Butler. And he snatched for the engine signal cord.

BUT even as Beaver Butler caught up the axe, raised it to strike, there was a rush from the *voyageurs* and *engagés* clustered on the deck forward. Panic-stricken men cursed and fought to be first, while over all rose the wild cry: "Cholera! Cholera! She's a pest ship! Git off—git off 'fore we ketch it too."

And in the half-light Garry was certain that he saw the dark face and waving hands of Chastain urging them on.

There was the sudden crack of a rifle and the leading man, almost at the landing stage, spun and went down, trailing a broken leg behind him. From the direction of the boilers Nick Kelso showed, ramming a new powder charge into his still smoking rifle as he ran.

"The next time I pull trigger, I'm shootin' at heads an' not at legs," he announced grimly. "An' I don't often miss."

The rush stopped short, especially as Si Pearson and Beaver Butler had likewise swung around and leveled their guns. But out of the mob burst the giant mate, Mattoon, his red hair tousled, his lips snarling. He glared up at the pilot house, and then round about him.

"Captain Waters is sick or dead; that makes me boss o' this boat. I'm takin' charge, an' I'm orderin' her tied up to the bank again. We're leaving this pest-boat—all hands. We're all goin' ashore."

"You're *boss?*" The answer was a bellow, and Frenchy Lenoir leaped into the clear. His jaw was thrust forward and his fists clenched and extended like clubs. "Lak' hell you been boss! I'm best damn man on boat. Me, Frenchy Lenoir—boss o' de Missouri!" And putting his head down, he charged with a bull-roar.

Garry Kent snatched the rifle from the pilot-house corner and was down the ladder in three bounds.

The Frenchman and Mattoon were already down on the deck, locked in desperate battle. Hands hammered and clawed, thumbs gouged, legs kicked and threshed. Over and over they tumbled, cursing and clawing as they rolled, Mattoon's red head now on top, and next moment Lenoir's black, tossing locks.

Without pausing to choose, Garry brought his heavy rifle barrel down on the nearest head. It happened to be Lenoir's, and at the thud the Frenchman quivered and went limp. The next instant Garry jabbed the muzzle of the cocked rifle into the mate's ribs.

"Get over there, Mattoon. Get over there with the rest of your dirty crew; and the first break you make for shore I'll drop you like a mad dog. The same for you, Chastain. I'm taking charge of this boat, and she's going to Tecumseh."

As the mate moved with the others, Beaver Butler cut the last mooring line. Nick Kelso let out a bellow as he turned back to the boilers. "Fort Tecumseh or bust! You heard 'im, you black imps. Git them b'ilers bubblin'; git that enjine goin'."

CLAMBERING back to the pilot house, Garry twirled the wheel, jerked the bell-cord. The *Cheyenne's* paddle-buckets started threshing; the *Cheyenne* backed out, and then churned ahead again, pointed upstream.

Nick Kelso came clambering back up the ladder.

"Butler an' Pearson's keepin' em herded forward under their guns. But it ain't jest Chastain an' the mate we gotta watch. Frenchy Lenoir has come to, an' he's wilder'n a bullet-singed buffalo."

"You'll have to watch them all, day and night. Until we

get to Fort Tecumseh." Garry's face was taut.

"An' when'll that be?"

When? Garry did not know. Distance, time, remembered landmarks—everything seemed to have been wiped out in that deadening brain weariness that had settled over him. All he knew was that Fort Tecumseh lay somewhere up the river—and that he had to take the *Cheyenne* there. A *Cheyenne* beset by mutiny and riddled by plague.

Had it come aboard with the papoose or had it come aboard at Fort Leavenworth—even St. Louis? Garry had never seen cholera, but he knew that no man knew how or when it traveled. It might strike its victim down in a day or a month. A drink from a cup—the mere touch of a rag weeks after it had been tossed away by an infected hand—and the pestilence sped. In St. Louis alone a quarter of the population had died . . .

"Pierre Chouteau—any others that sicken—" he said. "You'll have to feed them somehow, Nick. But don't let them get any closer than you can help."

"They'll get their grub in buckets on the end of a gun barr'l," said the old mountain man grimly. "If they moves a inch nearer, I'll give 'em the bullet as well as the bucket!"

CHAPTER X

SNAGS AHEAD

TIME no longer measured itself by days and nights to Garry Kent now, but by hideous nightmares. Nightmares of driving the *Cheyenne* upstream from early dawn to late dusk, of fitful sleep snatched between constant threats and yells from the mutinous crew cooped on the forward deck.

There, behind a dead-line of lanterns placed across the deck, Nick and Pearson and Butler stood guard. Yet even their hardened frames were buckling under the strain; their eyes like sunken coals in their heads as they fought to keep awake.

Of the girl, Jeannie MacLeod, Garry saw nothing. He never left the pilot house. Any fleeting instant might bring disaster. For the Missouri was at its mightiest now, slashing across whole points and bends, making new channels and leaving the old as shimmering lagoons that stretched invitingly only to end treacherously in shallows and bar-trapped backwater.

In the new-made maze there was no such thing as landmarks. All Garry could do was to put the *Cheyenne* into the opening where the Missouri raged fiercest, depending upon the very flood to mark its own channel.

Days were tortuous, nights no less so. Garry no longer dared stretch his blankets, but slept half-propped against the pilot-house wall, that the very pain of cramped muscles would guard him against sleep too deep.

So it was that, struggling to his feet with the first crack of dawn, he rubbed his bloodshot eyes, looked over the weather dodger, called to Butler and Pearson to stir themselves and cast off. Then ringing for the engine to start up, he headed the *Cheyenne* out and upstream for one more day of weary struggle.

He had rounded the first bend, turned the bow away from a great shore-jam of drifted logs and trees, and straightened her out into the main channel, when it struck.

So cat-like had danger come, creeping up the ladder and through the door, that Garry's sleep-drugged senses had not detected it. Only at the last moment a quick-drawn breath, the low scuff of a foot, the shadow at his elbow, whirled him about. He ducked—and staggered back as a glancing blow numbed his shoulder.

It was Chastain and Mattoon. Garry heard the brigade captain's half-curse, Mattoon's louder one. Then Chastain, knife in hand, was lunging viciously, while Mattoon grabbed the wheel, spun it hard over.

"Fort Tecumseh, huh? You was goin' to take the damn boat to Tecumseh, huh?"

Twisting, Garry felt the keen blade slash along his sleeve and forearm, bringing warm blood and the quick twinge of pain. Then Garry's belated fist shot out, caught Chastain full in the face, drove him back and around.

Without waiting for him to recover, Garry drove in, gripped arm and wrist, jerked them down and across his bent knee. He heard the dull crack, the shriek of pain; then hurled Chastain so hard against the pilot-house wall that the brigade captain rebounded, slumped down and lay in a tumbled heap against the wall and floor.

Then whirling, Garry leaped for the wheel, trying to jerk Mattoon's strong hands from it. Already he could see the *Cheyenne's* nose headed straight for that deadly pile of snags and trees on the bank.

Mattoon dropped the wheel with a cry of triumph. "That fixes the damn boat; an' now I'll fix you, you keelboat scum." His heavy fists punctuated the words, hammering brutally at Garry's head.

IT WAS no time for fist-fighting. Dropping his head under the battering fists, Garry closed in, fastened his hands on Mattoon's elbow and neck. Dizzily he tried to bring into play half-forgotten tricks of frontier wrestling.

He tried to get his own leg behind Mattoon's knee. But the mate twisted clear, clamped his own arms in a grizzly hug, tried to wrestle Garry back and down.

And suddenly Garry let him. Only at the last moment he gave a sudden spin; and through the pilot-house door and down the ladder they toppled, the red-headed mate underneath. The crash at the bottom almost drove the breath from Garry's lungs.

But the mate's head had struck the solid deck with a sickening, crackling thud. And when Garry stumbled dizzily to his feet, the mate lay crumpled and limp, blood oozing from his temple and from his lips and nostrils as well.

Nick Kelso's voice was calling out, Nick Kelso's feet trampling the deck. From the bow Frenchy Lenoir was likewise running. He paused at the crumpled mate, bent over him.

With sudden realization Garry turned, started for the pilot house again. The *Cheyenne* was rushing straight for the logs; was almost upon them.

A hand fell on his shoulder, jerked him back. It was Frenchy Lenoir. But Lenoir's eyes were blazing, his mouth was sputtering broken curses of indignation and rage. "Tam' before, you stop fight. Now you keel heem—you keel heem after I come all thees way to feeneesh fight. Now I never get chance to feeneesh; now I never get chance to show who boss o' Missouri."

And his tremendous hands caught Garry in their raking clutch.

Garry could not fight clear; he could not twist free or even loosen that grip. He felt the bear-hug grow tighter, felt it crushing the very breath out of him. And in the midst of it all he felt the jerking crash as the *Cheyenne* drove bow-first into the bank. The shock toppled them both almost off their feet, sent them stumbling and reeling to the very side.

But another thing the jar had done, too: it had loosened that frightful grizzly hug. And with the strength of desperation Garry suddenly twisted about, got his hip around and behind. And whirling the Frenchman over his hip, despite his bulk, he sent him flying out and over the *Cheyenne's* side.

There was a half-yell, drowned out in a gurgling splash.

THEN Nick Kelso was steadying Garry, Nick's voice was crying in his ear. "Got away—got away last night sometime. Beaver must 'a fell asleep! Mattoon—Chastain—"

"In pilot house. Jumped me from behind." Garry fought for his breath. "Chastain's still there—broken arm, whipped. But Mattoon swung the wheel—rammed her into a log-jam on the bank before I got him." With a groan of despair he turned forward. "She's stove in—finished—done for."

"Chastain, huh?" Nick was gone, throwing back his words. "He'll never live to crow. I'll tie 'im up—till we find the rope for the hangin'!"

Garry stumbled forward, bitterness in his soul. But to his amazement, when he reached the bow, there was no crumpled planking, no gutting snags protruding up and in, no gurgle of inrushing water.

Instead, the deadly jam of logs and tangled trees lay a full dozen yards off to the side; and in front of the bow itself was only a slanting bank of soft mud and low alder brush into which the *Cheyenne* had rammed herself.

And then a hand caught at his arm, and a feminine voice sounded in his ear. A timid voice, almost tearful.

"I tried to stop her—to steer her back into the channel. But all I could do was miss the snags. I—I got to the pilot house just a minute too late."

"All you did—was—miss the *snags!*" Garry whirled her around, hugged her in the immensity of his relief. "Why what more—"

Suddenly remembering, he released her, headed toward the pilot-house ladder. "She isn't snagged! But we've got to get her off—we've got to get her off and started again before the flood has a chance to wrench her."

With a little gasp she whirled and tagged at his heels. She was still close behind him when he laid hand to the spokes, gave them a tentative rock while he looked down speculatively at how far the *Cheyenne's* bow was stuck in the mud. But with her lips tight compressed and cheeks flushing, Jeannie MacLeod looked out and ahead.

And suddenly her eyes opened wide. She clutched his shoulder, pointed upstream with a shaking forefinger.

"Look! Up there—look!"

And as he looked, Garry's eyes and mouth, too, popped open.

CHAPTER XI

TECUMSEH OR BUST

THERE on a rounded knoll thrusting into the river on the near side, not two miles away, stood revealed in the first sunlight what the earlier dawn-shadows had previously concealed. A long row of log palisading; a square block-house, with other bastions at the palisade corners; smoke from morning breakfast fires slowly curling into the heavens.

Even as they looked, a gunshot sounded, and the Stars and Stripes ran fluttering to the top of the flagpole and whipped out bravely in the sunlight and breeze.

"Fort Tecumseh! Fort Tecumseh!" breathed the girl. "It is; it can't be anything else."

And now something else caught their gaze. Along the top of the near bank, already nearer them than the fort, rushed a great black horse, its rider bending low and spurring hard. Reckless of his mount's footing he came on, crashing through the scrub and brush, nor halted until he drew up on the bank rim just above the steamboat's imbedded bow.

With a choking cry the girl turned and clattered down the ladder steps. And after a dazed moment Garry followed.

By the time he reached the deck, forward, the rider was already out of his saddle and scrambling down the bank and onto the *Cheyenne's* bow. The tall, raw-boned frame, the long, lean face shouted out his Scotch blood even before the girl's glad cry, "Uncle Sandy! Uncle Sandy!"

"Ah, lassie, lassie, so ye've got here at last? And a pretty, pretty grown-up woman ye've turned out to be." Alexander MacLeod's rugged face glowed with pride, and he patted the nestled head and shoulder while he spoke.

"We've been looking for ye for days; but t'was only at dawn this mor-rning that we sighted yer stacks and the smoke from them." He looked about questioningly. "But where's Pierre Chouteau? Did he nae come along aboord like he wrote he would?"

Garry pushed forward, his voice a hoarse croak. "Back, Sandy MacLeod! Get back and off this boat. There's plague aboard: Captain Waters and Pierre Chouteau are both sick, maybe dead or dying from the cholera. Take the girl and get back to the fort at once; and make ready to isolate and nurse all hands aboard until the pest is spent."

Jeannie MacLeod suddenly laughed in a note both delighted and triumphant. "Cholera? I may not know about cholera, but I know *measles* when I see it. Pierre Chouteau and the captain are both broken out with red measles, but they're better and sitting up already. I went to give them medicine, even if you did order me not to, Mr. Kent. You've already had measles, Uncle Sandy, so you'd better hurry down and see Pierre Chouteau."

As the post factor turned and hurried aft, Garry Kent's head spun with dizziness. Measles? Not cholera? Impossible! And yet measles broke out in nine or ten days after exposure; and it had been just about that.

"Measles, huh? And us almost skeared to death, while a gal goes an' finds it out." Nick Kelso chuckled at Garry's ear. "Shore—shore. That half-Canuck knew it was measles; he never would 'a risked his skin with real pest aboard."

Si Pearson was squinting up-river. He suddenly hurled his wolf-skin cap high in air. "We made 'er, by gawsh! Fort Tecumseh—an' she never looked purtier."

"Yeah, we made 'er," said Nick Kelso. "Too bad, Garry, you had to throw that Frenchman into the river. He don't swim very good, an' I kinda liked the old grizzly—"

"Yeah? Well just look back yander," broke in Beaver Butler dryly, "an' look whut's comin'."

THERE, to Garry's amazement, stumbling along the bank, trudged a grotesque figure. Mud was matted in the black hair and beard, muddy water streaked forehead and cheeks, but nevertheless it was Frenchy Lenoir. Scrambling over the bow, he came sloshing along the deck, dripping water at every step, while his scowling black eyes were fixed on Garry.

Garry felt his muscles slump within him. His head throbbed, his whole body was numb from utter exhaustion. He felt that he could not raise a finger against the Frenchman's onslaught if his whole life depended upon it.

And then at three feet distance, Frenchy Lenoir came to a halt. The scowl changed to a grin, and his whole body shook with his rumbling laugh. "Dat's one tam' I fool you. But it been lucky for Frenchy, mebbe, dat you throw heem over *inside* of boat, an' not outside."

Garry looked from him dazedly to the girl. For the first time he realized that she had not gone aft with her uncle. Her face flushed, her eyelashes drooped under his gaze. Her voice was low, stammering. "Mr. Kent—Garry—"

Then to Garry's disgust Alexander MacLeod's voice was booming again at his shoulder, MacLeod's hand was clap-

ping him on the back. "Ah, Garry—a proud mon ye've made me this day, bringing the *Cheyenne* up-river! But what is it Pierre Chouteau is telling me aboot Chastain aboord? He raved so aboot wrecks an' piracy an' snags, I was afraid to stay wi' the mon! But why should Pierre Chouteau ha' trusted the scoundr-rel. Why should he ha' let him aboord at all, after all the messages I sent him?"

"The messengers never reached him; Chastain and the river saw to that," said Garry. "Also Chastain got to Pierre Chouteau first, with a note—a note from you—"

"ARR-R-RGH!" Alexander MacLeod's deep voice rumbled. "The sly de'il. Forged my name and wr-riting, just like he forged hundreds of trade slips before I found out and dischar-ged him for it—that and tricky dealings with the Hudson's Bay men that have been trickling in on the upper river. But what aboot the note I gave ye?"

"Pierre Chouteau and his clerk did not recognize the signature. It was written, you remember, when you were so sick with fever and ague you could hardly hold the pen."

"And a full week it took after I got back to Fort Tecumseh from the mountains before I shook it wi' me rambling and oot of my head like any loon. It was likely eavesdroppin' to that that sent Chastain to his Hudson's Bay friends, and then downriver in a stolen express."

Alexander MacLeod glanced about with satisfaction. "Ah, weel, t'is over now, an' the de'il fast-tied for his rightful deser-rts. The *Cheyenne* has run the river. And wi' the plows and seed-grain in her holds, an' more steamboats coming after, we'll ha'e so many settlers on the Missouri in a year that we'll cr-rowd the Hudson's Bay men all the way back into Canada and beyond."

"Plows and settlers don't make settlements," said Nick Kelso dryly. "It takes women—and children."

"They'll come, they'll come. For wherever a gude man goes, a gude woman will always follow." Alexander MacLeod nodded confidently. "An' speakin' o' that, I'll be needing a gude man mysel' to take the place of that traitor Chastain. So, Garry, if ye'll just pack away ye'r traps and come ashore to the Fort, we can decide on what would be fair in the way o' salar-ry."

At Nick Kelso's remarks about women and children, the girl's face had flushed rosy red, and her eyes had dropped. But now she lifted them, and they were bright on Garry.

As for Garry, his brain was awhirl. Sub-factor and brigade captain in place of Chastain? Why that meant he would stay here, near Fort Tecumseh—near her!

But then another vision rose before Garry Kent's eyes: a vision born of things seen and heard in those momentous past weeks. Steamboats: steamboats had come to the Missouri. They had come to stay. They would settle the rivers, bringing up men and supplies, taking back all that the mighty mountains and the great valleys gave. Steamboats would do that. But steamboats needed men to run them!

Slowly he shook his head.

"Thanks—thanks, Sandy MacLeod. But I'm not a *voyageur* or post-factor; I'm a river man. And I still have work to do, getting the *Cheyenne* out of the mud and on up to Fort Tecumseh."

The girl's eyes clouded momentarily with disappointment, but then lighted again at MacLeod's reply.

"Ye're maybe right, lad—both right and canny—to stay on as the *Cheyenne's* captain. There'll be a gr-reat future for steamboats on the western river. And we'll be seeing ye often as ye come and go."

"Captain, is eet?" Frenchy Lenoir's voice broke in excitedly. "You goin' be captain o' the *Cheyenne,* M'sieu Garry? Den you need good mate. Me, Frenchy Lenoir, I'm spik for be dat mate. Me, Frenchy Lenoir, boss o' Missouri—best damn man—"

Suddenly he caught himself, blinked, and went on. "—*second* best damn man on river. Onlee eef I don' slip dat tam', mebbe I still be *best* man on river."

Garry laughed, held out his hand. "I'm not giving you another chance to see who's best man. You're mate of the *Cheyenne* as long as I'm captain. And now we've got to get to work, and get this boat up to Tecumseh."

"Tecumseh!" Nick Kelso let out a whoop. "Fort Tecumseh or bust—an' we ain't busted yet. If we can't git 'er outa the mud an' up to Tecumseh, we—we'll move Fort Tecumseh down here, by gawsh!"

THE END

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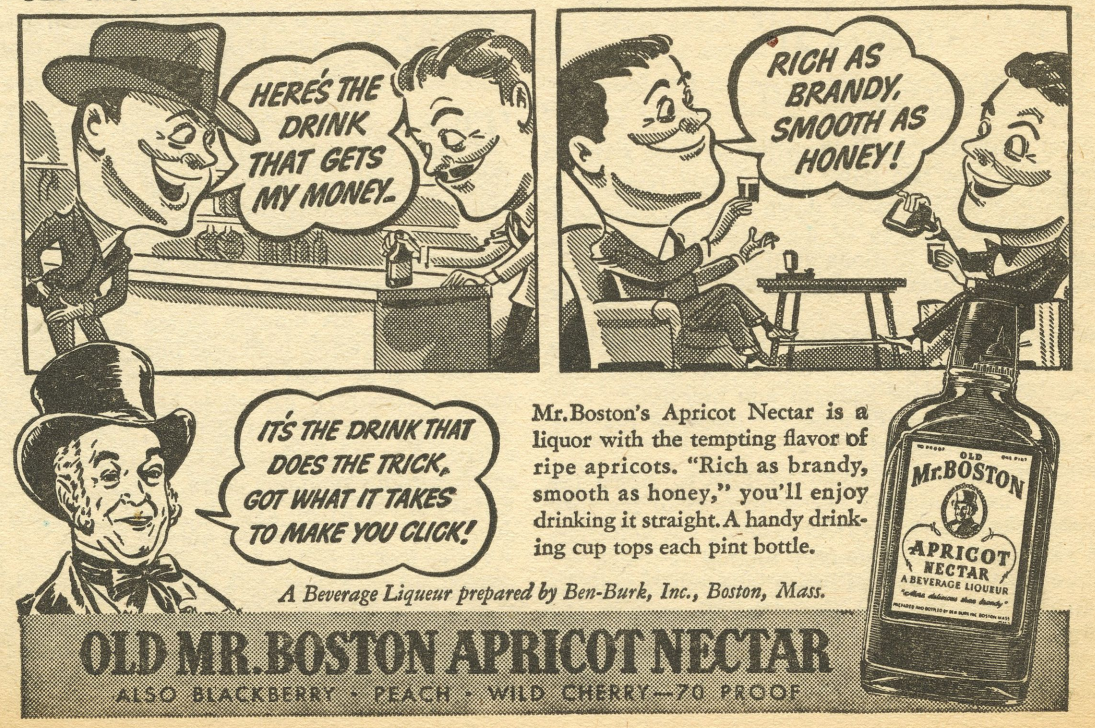

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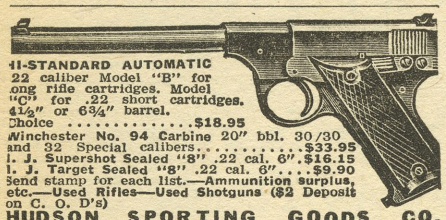

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Radical changes are being made in ARGOSY's appearance these days, and we've been following reader comment on them with a great deal of care. For that reason we're happy to put on the record this letter from one of our standbys who doesn't hesitate to give us his reactions, favorable or unfavorable:

MERRELL G. KENYON

Years ago ARGOSY was offering valuable prizes (yearly subscriptions to same) for letters from readers. In those good old days I always managed to have an extra dime a week, so even the reward of a year of ARGOSY did not tempt me to write. Besides, I was content with every phase of ARGOSY—sto-

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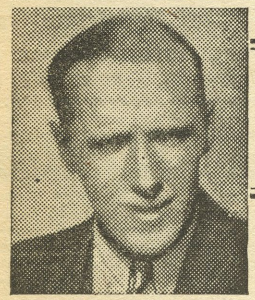

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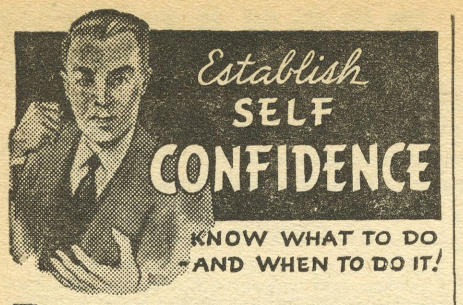

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ries, pictures, make-up, et al. So why write?

But at the first change that did not meet with my approval I sure stated myself. Perhaps a few other old timers introduced themselves at the same time.

I have just received your announcement concerning further changes and I am for them 100 percent. This time I am writing to praise instead of condemn.

Now please, in this era of wars and fifth columnists, couldn't you find it in your heart to reprint a bit of humor for your newer fans?

I would enjoy reading again, and urging my friends to read, Edgar Franklin's "laugh-a-line" novels—in this order: "Poker Faces"; "Where Was I?"; "Dinner for Cynthia." I enjoyed "The Ship of Ishtar" both times and purchased your companion magazines to thrill again to "The Face in the Abyss" and the "Snake Mother."

Go ahead, change anything in ARGOSY but the fine stories.
Chaffee, N. Y.

WE NOW MOVE ON to the Is Our Face Red Department, with special reference to Fred Painton's story, "Man Alive", in our issue of February 8. Several (we regret to say) pertinent comments are made by the vigilant.

WILLIAM B. DINWIDDIE

Page 9, column 3, last two paragraphs: the man was shot in the *back* over the heart and had died *instantly.* The face held an amazed expression as if the bullet that had hit his chest had come completely by surprise. My, my, my—a two-faced man with a couple of lives!

Freddy boy, they have wonderful men where you come from.

And then you know insurance companies have clauses in their policies. Also they can revoke them for misconduct in a case like this. Or maybe the policy was made of rubber.
Hampton, Va.

We call this to Mr. Painton's attention more in sadness than in anger. The real blush of shame is on the face of an assistant editor around here, for letting such a quaintly multiple death get by him in the copy. . . . As for insurance policies, we don't understand 'em; never did.

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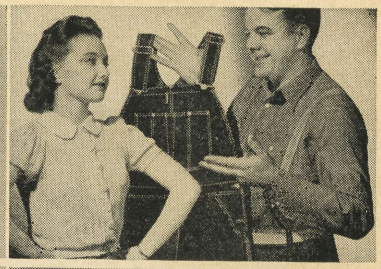

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